COLD RICE

By the same Author

ATHAWAR HOUSE

COLD RICE

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K. NAGARAJAN

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SHAKTI KARYALAYAM
MADRAS - MADURA - COIMBATORE - TIRUNELVELI

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Cold Rice", not inaptly, describes this collection of short stories. All of them except one – *The Oracle of the Nim Tree* – have been published before, in newspapers or periodicals. Of the *Hindu's* hospitality I have freely partaken in the past, and to its Editor I am beholden for kind permission to reprint the stories – and there are six of them – which were published in the *Hindu.* "*The Ways of a Maid*" recently appeared in *Triveni,* "*Motives and Men*" was published some time ago in the Pudukkottai College Magazine and "*A Painful Interview*" in the Sri Minakshi College Miscellany. My best thanks are due to the Editors of *Triveni* and the Pudukkottai College Magazine and the authorities of the Annamalai University for permission to include the stories in this collection.

I shall not apologise for this venture, for apology, at best, is tiresome. If the dissatisfied reader should wonder why on earth I did not "shun the bowl" but dipped my quill in it, my answer is, "*Cacoethes scribendi.*" I wrote to please myself and I publish the stories because, like all authors, I hope for the best. The characters in these stories are all fictitious; the *locale* is largely the Coromandel Coast, with a little re-shuffling and re-naming of districts; and, as for the period covered by them, it has more in common with the world which preceded it than the one - brave and new? - which the end of the war is expected to usher in.

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A PAINFUL INTERVIEW

IT was a painful interview.

Judge Panchapagesa Sastri, it seemed, wanted to give his daughter in marriage to me. So that, when Tahsildar Margam Aiyar suggested that my father and I had better call on the Judge in a friendly way and offered to conduct us personally to the great man's presence, my father, after some hesitation, agreed. It was not customary, of course. There are some well-understood rules in such matters and, strictly speaking, it was Panchapagesa Sastri, as the father of the girl, who should have paid the first visit. But Margam Aiyar, with obvious tact, insisted that it was all in the way of friendship and that Panchapagesa Sastri would visit us in person in due course and make a formal offer of marriage. My father, who was not taken in by the pretence, acquiesced in it.

I was an eligible bachelor. I had taken my degree in English Honours, was a graduate in law, twenty-three and good-looking. So that, of the triple qualifications one looks for in the prospective bridegroom, I possessed two. I had no property worth mentioning, it is true, but being a lawyer, I hoped easily to make my fortune. I had a good local reputation for English scholarship. But none knew better than I how ill I deserved it. I loved and admired the language, its resilience, its wonderful expressiveness. But I wrote it ill and spoke it worse. I contrived to express myself, of course, but I spoke heavily, clumsily and with tremendous effort and all the time I was painfully aware that simpler, homelier modes of expression existed, which hinted their presence in indistinct regions of the mind and, like children playing at hide-and-seek, discovered themselves after I had confessed defeat. I had other qualifications if one cared for them. I was centre forward for my College, knew a lot of Sanskrit (it was the family inheritance), wore *khaddar* and was intensely interested in politics and had a strong and well-grounded objection to British rule. But these had no place for consideration in marriage problems. Good looks, education and property, these alone counted. My father was an old-fashioned person, knew no English, was altogether clumsy and incompetent. My mother, worse. She was an excellent wife and an adorable mother. She assisted my father in the performance of the *yagna* and the *homa* and other spiritual exercises with reverent zest and had fed, clothed and brought us up with old-fashioned scrupulousness and care. Wealth, as such, had no attractions for her, though she loved to gaze on the personal adornments of the rich. But she longed for a daughter-in-law drawn from the official classes (which, to her, was synonymous with the rich), just one like Parvatam next door. The girl wore such lovely *saris* and resplendent jewels and sang and played in a way that made men marvel. Kuppammal, our sour-tempered neighbour, who lived over the way and constantly came in to borrow or return a spoonful of pepper or salt and stayed gossiping in that acid way of hers, had tried to infect my mother with a hatred of daughters-in-law in general, and those drawn from rich families in particular. Parvatam, it seemed, was a terrible highbrow. She would lie in bed long after day-break and never come downstairs till the milkman had come and coffee was ready. And every other day she would run away to her father's house on some pretext or other, leaving her old mother-in-law to fetch water from the well, do the cooking before office-time and run the family generally. The mother-in-law, being a clever woman, just kept up appearances and put on her best face over it. But, *she*, Kuppammal, knew. "How could humble folk like us stand these girls who dressed and 'played the box' like a dancing-girl in the sight of all men?" My mother, simple soul, would listen wondering that such things could be, and express to her, in a voice full of concern, the eager hope that God would send her a dutiful daughter-in-law. But then, once Kuppammal's back was turned, she would turn the matter over in her mind, feel instinctively that her harsh judgements were due to her cynical humour and decide afresh for a pretty, little daughter-in-law who would step out of a horse-drawn coach, clad in diamonds and a gorgeous *sari* and who 'played the box,' meaning the harmonium. It is no matter for surprise, therefore, that when Margam Aiyar hinted at the possibility of an alliance with the wealthy District Judge, there was a flutter of joy in the maternal breast.

We went, the three of us, Margam Aiyar, my father and I. Margam Aiyar led self-importantly, and my father, I could see, was awkward and nervous. I felt cocksure and a bit elated. (Whether the marriage came off or not, it was something that a live District Judge could consider me in relation to his daughter. It would set me on my feet for six months at least. There was a cad of a District Munsif who treated me in a very off-hand fashion and I wanted to see the look on his silly face when he heard of it all). My father was impressed at the sight of the District Judge's bungalow. It had been built for European officers in days when it was thought they would last for ever, and it was a sign of the changing times that a 'native,' could inhabit it. A *duffedar* in a scarlet sash thrown over a dirty toga *salaamed* respectfully to the Tahsildar. We were shown in and informed that the great man was at his ablutions. We sat in a big hall where

Panchapagesa Sastri held his office. (There was such a thing as an office-room but it had been given over to the servants.) A rough wooden table, a couple of armless chairs, a rosewood armchair with one arm gone, an anæmic-looking rattan lounge and an old sofa, through whose faded cretonne the horse-hair showed, were all that were there in the way of furniture. At one end was a baby's cot and, from the verandah at the back, a purple and gold *sari* gleamed in the morning sun. Piles of papers littered the judicial office-table, under which a little child, naked save for its bangles of gold and silver anklets, played with the contents of the waste-paper basket. To my father's whispered question, Margam Aiyar replied that it was Panchpagesa Sastri's grandchild by his daughter. (I knew the child's father—a rake, if there was one. He had run through his patrimony in an incredibly short space of time and now came to do his duty by his wife and child in his father-in-law's house once a quarter. He used to come with his mouth stuffed with tobacco, a hairy chest and a coloured cloth round his waist, stay for a few days and leave promising to return in a week.) We sat idly, Margam Aiyar vainly endeavouring to make conversation. I soon became aware that I was an object of interest. Two or three women were prying through a window opposite. I strove to preserve a steady and, if possible, a superior look. I felt I could pass muster, but was doubtful if my father would. I confess to a momentary disloyalty to the old man, who, I felt, might be a disqualification. But I rallied round to him and was duly humiliated and abashed. An old lady, covered from head to foot in a mud-coloured silk cloth, the sign of fashionable widowhood, came up to Margam Aiyar and, eyeing me steadily, asked in a strident voice, "Is this the boy?" Margam Aiyar answered "Yes," and added the information that I was an M.A., B.L., and a vakil. She promptly said, "What is there in being a vakil? There are several who do not make even ten rupees a month."

"But," said Margam Aiyar, "this boy is different. He is very clever and will come up very high."

"One cannot tell," countered the lady. "Everything depends on luck. And it requires so much cleverness. One should know how to talk well. And that is no joke. There are vakils who don't earn even their *jutka* fare to court."

I was chilled. I did not like her way of clubbing destiny and capacity together. The uncertainty of fate in ordering my career, I could understand. But her doubts of my ability to make my mark, to earn a living wage! And the way she gave expression to them! I hated her from that instant. I could not help mentally contrasting her with my mother. In similar circumtances, she would have said, "Oh, I am so glad. God bless the young man; with His blessings all will turn out well." And she would have concluded with the Tamil version of the truth that what man has done, man can do.

Panchapagesa Sastri came in presently, with measured tread. He was a tall, bald-headed person, whose horn-rimmed spectacles ill-accorded with the thickly-applied smear of sacred ashes on his forehead and the rosary of beads, sacred to the Lord Siva, which adorned his dark-brown chest.

"Hullo, Margam Aiyar, Good morning. How do you do? All well, I suppose? Have you been waiting long?" "Oh no," said Margam Aiyar, rising hurriedly. "We were talking to your mother." (We had been kept waiting for more than half-an-hour, of which the old lady had not kept us engaged for more than five minutes.)

"You know I have been very busy of late," said Panchapagesa Sastri. "I had to finish the judgment in this sensational murder case before I went for my bath. Oh, this Sessions work is simply killing. I have been writing to Government for an Assistant Sessions Judge, but they will not let me have one."

"But I understand that you are doing a lot of civil work, too,' said Margam Aiyar, in a tone of admiration.

"That's exactly the trouble. Government thinks that I can carry on. I met Mr. Justice Halliday the other day and he told me that my out-turn was the greatest. But they can have no idea how I am slaving all day long. I am unable to attend to my household affairs."

That was true. For the money he received, Panchapagesa Sastri laboured hard and well. He had not a moment's leisure and, if he had, he would not have liked it. He was wedded to his work. He wrote long-winded judgments, which were by no means remarkable for felicity of expression. But his decisions were invariably sound and gave satisfaction and he had a thorough grasp of the law of his country. A government which grudgingly started to give high judicial appointments to the 'native' cordially recognised his merit and a Bar, which would excuse anything in a judge except incapacity, honoured him for his ability.

Panchapagesa Sastri went over to his table and took out a pad of papers and explained to Margam Aiyar, in laborious detail, comparative tables of civil and criminal work done by him and his two immediate predecessors, the average pendency of cases, the number of judgments written, the total number of pages covered, the percentage of decisions confirmed, the number of persons convicted, sentenced to be hanged, acquitted and so forth. Panchapagesa Sastri had an almost

American faith in statistics. All that, however, made me sick. At his age, I thought, he could have taken things more equably. His own less fortunate brethren in the judicial service complained that his promotions were altogether undeserved and had been obtained by his shameless zeal in convicting persons accused of criminal offences and by dancing attendance on his superior officers, who were British.

Half-an-hour elapsed and Margam Aiyar seemed to think it was time that some notice was taken of us. Panchapagesa Sastri evidently thought so too, for just as the former was opening his mouth to draw attention to our presence, the District Judge asked,

"That is the boy you were speaking of ?"

"Yes," answered Margam Aiyar, "and that is his father."

My father realised that he was being mentioned and shifted in his seat.

"*Veruminai irungo,*" said the great man, motioning my father to continue to be seated. My father subsided in his seat.

"You practise here ?" asked the judge.

"Yes," I replied, "And I have had the honour of appearing before you once or twice." The words came in that rounded, exuberant fashion and I could not help uttering them.

"Oh yes. Your face is familiar." I was grateful for the recognition, though it was no matter for surprise seeing that I had diligently waited in his court for days on end, praying for all I was worth that he would give me a commission or a crown defence.

Then addressing Margam Aiyar,

"There are so many vakils nowadays. In fact one cannot keep count of them. And they multiply like germs, you know."

He laughed. It was a joke. Margam Aiyar laughed too, but with the restraint of a social inferior. I am afraid I smiled a sycophantic smile. It was not till I reached home that I realised that I was one of the amusing microbes which had received judicial notice of their existence. It was too late then for me to resent the comparison.

The big man asked me about my practice. A very inconvenient question. Self-respect demanded that I should romance a bit and I wasn't particularly good at romancing. I answered that I was making about a hundred rupees a month. I satisfied my morals by stressing the adverb.

"I suppose you get a few commissions and things of that kind?"

"Yes, now and again," I answered truthfully. But I felt the question cut like a knife. Evidently, I did not look like being equal to earning a paltry hundred rupees a month. I suppose one should fuss about, talk platitudinously and wear an air of silly profundity to be credited with the ability to make a living. That, at any rate, was what the oily-tongued miser Ramanna and the ill-mannered bully, Bhagirathachari did. These men were Panchapagesa Sastri's favourites.

"It is a difficult profession, no doubt," said Margam Aiyer. "Sir V. Bashyam Aiyangar, V. Krishnaswami Aiyar and all the rest of them had to struggle hard before they could make both ends meet. It is certain that merit always pays in the long run. At one time, it seems, that Dewan Bahadur Ardrachari thought of drowning himself in the Bay of Bengal."

The conversation was taking a very depressing turn. I saw, however, that Margam Aiyar, poor man, was only trying to present me in a favourable light.

"But all cannot be Bashyam Aiyangars. And our present-day young men won't take pains. They are very superficial. They just 'crop' their hair, dress like Europeans or play at politics, which I call playing with fire," said the judge.

Of the former delinquency, I was demonstrably innocent, I was grateful that my predilections for the latter amusement were not known to the judge. Margam Aiyar, who was aware of them, looked guiltily at me. Panchapagesa Sastri intercepted the look, but misunderstanding its meaning, said:

"I am glad this young man has not taken to these fashions. We often forget that we are Brahmins."

"No such danger in the case of this young man," said Margam Aiyar. "He comes of a very orthodox family. On his mother's side, he is connected with Appaiya Dikshitar's family. And they are great Sanskrit scholars."

My father evidently thought he could get in a word now. The mention of Appaiya Dikshitar's name was an intimation to him that his family connections were being talked about. He made as if to say something, but Panchapagesa Sastri was too quick for him. My father's face fell.

"That is very good," said the judge patronisingly. "Very few read Sanskrit nowadays and we are forgetting our ancient culture. This English education business is being overdone. And even there, the classics are not studied. Our boys cannot write at all. Johnson, Addison, Macaulay, whoever reads them nowadays?"

I was inwardly amused. Panchapagesa Sastri was no doubt a good judge. But, I thought, he could draw the line when it came to discussing style. I had frequently thought that a passage selected at random from his judgments might usefully be given to examination students to test their ability to detect errors.

"Yes, yes. And Shakespeare and Milton. Who is there to beat Shakespeare?" said Margam Aiyar, under the stress of Panchapagesa Sastri's literary effusions.

"Oh, Shakespeare! There has been only one other like him and that was Kalidasa. Do you know, Margam Aiyar, I have been reading Panini's *sutras*, lately?"

My father's face brightened. He heard Panini's name mentioned and thought he could contribute something to the conversation. Panini was in his line and, really, he could talk at least as informingly about him as Panchapagesa Sastri could talk about the Hindu Law of Succession. But, no. Panchapagesa Sastri resolutely switched back to his tone of deprecation and said:

"But whoever cares, Margam Aiyar? A handful of us cannot change the course of things. Depend upon it, our young men won't take the trouble. They read trashy novels or the newspapers or talk about Gandhi and Das." (This man was great at stating half, and quarter, truths).

"Mr. Gandhi is a great man. But he is very unpractical," said Margam Aiyar.

"It is all a dangerous greatness, I tell you, Margam Aiyar. It is all very well for people like him. But as our Collector said the other day, he is leading our young men to the devil. As you say, he is very unpractical. Take his *khaddar* programme, for instance. He wants us all to turn into spinners and weavers.

Who will do the rest of the business ? And if everybody began to spin, will we get Swaraj ? A nation of weavers we will be and nothing else.'

A doggerel rhyme came into Margam Aiyar's head. And, because it came and not because he saw any relevancy, he said,

"When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman ?"

I could not help putting my oar in.

"We might all be gentlemen, Sir," I said. "I am afraid you misunderstand Mahatmaji's purpose. His gospel of the *charka* is intended to make us economically self-reliant. It is a unifying force and incidentally it will increase our national self-respect. As it is, we are at the mercy of Manchester and the piece-goods man."

Panchapagesa Sastri was somewhat taken aback. Evidently he did not relish the note of debate in my observations. He was the sort of person who made other people presents of his opinions in an authoritative way and got easily upset if any protest was uttered.

"You wear *khaddar*, I see," he said.

"Guilty. I regard it as a sacred duty." I gave the sentiment dignified utterance.

I thought the interview would come to an end. But he temporised.

"I don't object to one's wearing *khaddar*. But the mischief is in the teaching. People make a fetish of Gandhi, Satyagraha, civil disobedience and all the rest of it. It is very disturbing."

"It is intended to disturb. To disturb us out of our sloth and to disturb us into a divine discontent.

It is intended to disturb the white man and it will do him good."

"If you think you will disturb the European, you are sadly mistaken. He won't release his hold for all the world. Oh, they are a great people. See, they have conquered nearly half the world and after so many years we cannot rule ourselves."

"Is that any reason why we should continue so for all time? And even you seem to agree that they have a hold which they won't release. We think it is time the Old Man of the Sea climbed down."

Panchapagesa Sastri was getting out of his depth. This was a language which he did not understand and hence despised. My father, who had been looking on, thought that I was making a great speech. Margam Aiyar was disturbed. He did not like our tilting against each other over such an irrelevant matter. Politics had no place for consideration when parties met with a view to marriage. So, he deftly struck in, saying, "That is all for the professional politician. We have got to live, marry and look after the family."

This last necessity of our lives was enforced by the youngest member of the judge's family requiring urgent attention. The child who was playing under the table overturned an ink-pot and hit his head against the table. He set up a deafening howl. The great man at once took the child in his arms and, making funny noises, endeavoured to soothe him. But the child was a devil and wouldn't stop. At length, the scarlet-sashed *duffedar* came and carried him away, acquiring a few black blotches on to his lurid sash. There was a pause. Margam Aiyar, in a low voice, asked Panchapagesa Sastri, "Where is the child?"

The child in question was the thirteen-year old daughter of the judge. The appellation was only a customary endearment and incidentally fitted in with the language of social reformers who would stop early marriages. Margam Aiyar, remembering the purpose of our visit, wanted me and my father to have a look at the girl.

"She is somewhere inside. My wife has not been well these two days," and he proceeded to give us a few details regarding his domestic life.

The clock struck ten. The judge recollected himself, got up and said :

"Oh, it is ten o'clock. I did not notice the time." Then, in his grandest manner, "I am very pleased to have seen you, young man. I suppose you have got work in Court to-day ?"

I hadn't, but could not be expected to confess it outright. I just mumbled affirmatively. We got up to go and the great man joined his palms in a parting salutation to my father. My father acknowledged it respectfully and we all made for the door, Margam Aiyar bringing up the rear. Once outside, he started on a eulogy of the judge and his family to my father. I was pre-occupied and did not listen. I would have to go home, tell my father and mother all that took place, and I seemed to suffer from a dearth of agreeable information.

Anyway, I was glad to go.

It was a painful interview. It had been conducted in English. Throughout and unqualifiedly.

THE WAYS OF A MAID

IF you had gone into the village of Velanadi and asked about Elsie Mary, the daughter of Maria Susai, the ground-nut trader, they would have told you that she was an unschooled tomboy. Her step-mother—the virtuous Vyakula Mary — would have pulled a long face (effortlessly, as her face was naturally long, which made her look like a horse) and wailed that she was a regular hoyden, a trial and an irritation.

Her father — but he was chronically drunk, so it would not have mattered what he said.

But Elsie had her own partisans. The young men of the village — the unsteady ones, of course — swore by her and said she was a phantom of delight. Not in so many words, for they did not know Wordsworth and, moreover, verbal ecstasy about unmarried girls is not allowed, still they would have conveyed the idea. Old Arokiasami, who is as wise as an owl, would have cleared his throat noisily and classed her definitely as good. But what is Arokiasami ? A stone which has rolled over half the known world and come back mossless, moneyless. His opinion, almost certainly, would not have gone down with a Court but I shouldn't brush it aside. From all of which you will see that Elsie was quite a character.

In any case, she was distinctly upsetting. As Nambikkai Mary, the Bible woman, said, "She even made mass a mummery." Father Gomez had to speak to the young men very seriously about their behaviour in Church. But Elsie was unabashed. Even the confessional had no terrors for her. She used to come out of Church on Saturday evenings looking less like a repentant sinner than one who has been up to some new devilment.

There was only one thing to do and that was to marry her off. Would that improve matters ? asked Sandana Mary, the catechist's wife, a pale shadow of Vyakula Mary's. "She would, at any rate, be off our hands," answered Vyakula.

"That's true. The responsibility would be someone else's then," Sandana Mary would dutifully agree, like one saying the responses at Church.

And Vyakula Mary made her plans. She was rather an expert at them. The schemes of mice and men might miscarry, but never Vyakula Mary's. They hadn't, so far. Did she not manage her husband, the ground-nut business, the entire household, all of it, except, of course, Elsie ?

She surveyed the village mentally and fixed upon Sani Glass Odayan. (Sani Glass wasn't a species of glass but only Stanislaus, a more than middle-aged widower, worldy-wise and well-to-do.) But Elsie laughed so consumedly at the idea that Sani Glass went off in a huff. Vyakula Mary, beside herself with vexation, went to her husband and asked him to speak to Elsie. Maria Susai, good man, tried in a lucid interval, but when did you hear of a piece of cotton-wool moving a slab of granite ? That was the beginning and, in one sense, the end. Vyakula Mary, being a virtuous woman, did not complain loudly. She only tugged at her face and went about looking horsier then ever. Other names were proposed by well-meaning neighbours but Elsie only laughed and lollopped off to church, tank or *shandy* according to the hour. Father Gomez intervened. "You must marry, Elsie," he urged.

Elsie caught herself with a jerk. Kindly Father Gomez she could not brush aside lightly. She looked around her for a second and made as if to open her heart to him. Then, apparently thinking better of it, she laughed. "No fear, Father, marriage is not for me. I shall probably go into a convent."

Father Gomez was not misled by the bantering tone. He had noticed the earlier movement and its repression. He stayed his hand, intending to tackle her later.

The strain increased in Maria Susai's household. Vyakula Mary, for all her reputedly silent suffering, used to say things which burnt into one's sensibilities like hot cinders. She starved — or said she did—kicked her brats without provocation and slanged Maria Susai worse than ever, all in Elsie's sight. Things got grievously out of gear in the Maria Susai *menage* and the ground-nut trade languished. " You are making your mother unhappy, Elsie, and she has been more than a mother to you," the friends of the family would say.

"Hasn't she ?" Elsie would reply with what began as a smile and ended as a glint in the eye.

Arokiasami added his voice; faltering and feeble, he said, "Why don't you marry and be done with it, Elsie ? After all, you must marry some day."

" I suppose I must, uncle. To please mother," replied Elsie jestingly.

Arokiasami tossed his aged head. "Mother be hanged!" he said. "Marry to please yourself and to run your own home, my dear." He pounded a mouthful of betel and flicked it into his toothless mouth. Then, drawing Elsie to him, he told her in a low voice, "You mustn't make yourself out to be worse than you are, dear."

"I do not feel virtuous at all, uncle," said Elsie, smiling.

"Don't be silly. The rest of them are not a tenth as good as you, not by a long chalk" said Arokiasami and he was seized with a violent fit of coughing.

There was something in Arokiasami's manner which touched a chord in her. He was her oldest friend; when she was a little girl he used to take her on his knee and tell her long stories about the march to Mandalay, the storming of Theebaw's Palace and give her his general service medal to wear round her neck. And he had yet another claim to consideration. Was he not the uncle of Moses, the motor-driver, that hefty youth, broad-shouldered and tall, who paid her silent homage with his eyes, so unlike those anaemic, buttockless youths who grinned and jabbered at the sight of her like the monkeys of the Velamalai forest? Moses was not a he-man by any means but he was the sort of man one liked to go about with at the *Pasco* festival at Eastertide, his broad back and shoulders showing to advantage in his grey flannel—or, was it *khaddar* ?—coat with the twin bands running down the back. Elsie, for all her cool sophistication, was given to much day-dreaming. In her mind's eye, for some time past, there had been the picture of a house, in fact the creeper-covered two-roomed cottage at the corner of the Cotton-growers' Lane. In that picture was the figure of a man coming home to her with gifts of flowers and fruit and, in special, of slabs of chocolate from the glass-fronted shop at Poppali, not the gummy, sticky stuff they sold at Vazhamangalam. Supper over, they would sit in the starlight and she would listen to the tale of his day's doings and, by a process of reverie, the steps of which she could not afterwards disentangle, see herself nestling on his broad chest, while he imprinted warm kisses on her all-too-responsive lips.

The figure was that of Moses, the motor-driver, and her lips would quiver with those phantom kisses, so startlingly real did they seem. To that cherished dream she would revert as to a haven whenever — and that was nearly always now—she wanted to escape from her step-mother and that home of theirs which was—well, anything but a home. And now, Arokiasami's words set her thinking, if the sudden uprising in her mind of the home of her fancy could be called thinking. She seemed to see the Velanadi-Vazhamangalam—Poppali bus careering down the street and drawing up in front of the creeper-covered cottage at the corner of the Cotton-growers' lane, and Moses coming in to her in that grey flannel—or, was it *khaddar* ?—coat with the broad bands at the back. She was ready with coffee for him—for, were not motor-drivers notoriously fond of coffee ?—in a brass tumbler. She knew the very tumbler, the long brass one with the scroll-work which her mother had brought home as a bride.

Her thoughts were interrupted. That cough again. Elsie held Arokiasami's head and waited till he recovered himself. And, just then, as though her very thoughts had materialised, Moses came driving his bus, and Elsie, taking leave of Arokiasami, left. "Think it over, Elsie," Arokiasami called at parting.

"I will, uncle," called back Elsie.

And she did think it over. And she acted—as Elsie alone could act. One fine morning in April, when the gold mohur trees in the adjoining Velamalai forest were aflame with pink and yellow flowers, Elsie walked across the fields and joined Moses' bus.

"Where are you off to, Elsie ?" asked the people in the bus.

"To my aunt's at Vazhamangalam," said Elsie cheerily, as Little Red Riding Hood might have said.

She did go to her aunt's but that was only for an hour. From her aunt's she walked to the railway station, where Moses was waiting with tickets and they took the train to Kalparai. There was no reason why it should have been Kalparai; it might have been Kurinji or Kalasamangalam, but Kalparai was the end of the line and the last place where her people would have thought of looking for them.

And they lingered at Kalparai for a week; a week of sunshine and delicious moonlight, of the singing of birds, of the music of the surf in the Bengal Bay and endless lovers' nonsense.

Moses had his qualms. Man-like, he said, "Let us marry and make it regular, Elsie."

"That isn't easy, you stupid. Who will marry us here? And there will be questions to answer. Let us go back to Velanadi and good old Father Gomez will marry us."

"But they won't let us, darling, once we get home," pleaded Moses.

"Oh, be sure, they will," laughed Elsie. "My step-mother is so virtuous, she will insist on our being made honest."

Which only shows that a woman's instinct is not always the mathematical certainty which poets and philosophers assert it to be. Moses was not satisfied but, being too much in love, left it there.

II

When Velanadi came to know, they had the sensation of their lives. Elsie was not missed the whole of that August morning. Vyakula Mary noticed that Elsie had not been in for her breakfast of cold rice but that only gave her a pleasant sense of grievance.

"Gallivanting, the shameless wanton," she hissed to herself. At midday, Maria Susai came in, ravening for food. He was very pleased with himself, too, having had an order for ten sacks of ground-nut and the promise of more. He bathed in the back-yard well and squatting in front of a tray, from which all the aluminium had vanished, asked, "Where is the child?" meaning Elsie.

"In the mother's womb," snapped Vyakula Mary in answer.

Maria Susai was smoked out. He ate his dinner in silence and, lying down on the cowdung-washed floor, fell into a dreamless sleep. When he woke up and found that Elsie had not turned up, he grew anxious and, when a hurried visit to Vazhamangalam elicited the news that Elsie had been there for an hour and then left, anxiety became an assurance of ill. Vyakula Mary, sitting on the *pial* with her legs hunched up, while a fractious baby tugged at her milkless breasts, shrieked. "She has gone off."

"Gone off! Where?" asked Maria Susai, as if in a dream. "Ask that waster, the fellow who drives the bus," replied Vyakula, bringing down the remnants of Maria Susai's world crashing about his ears.

And Vyakula Mary told him of many things she had seen and heard. For the first time in many years, Maria Susai allowed a note of complaint to creep into his voice. "Why didn't you tell me before, Vyakula?" Vyakula Mary replied as she alone could reply and Maria Susai's bewilderment increased. "What are we to do now! Oh, my child, my child," he sobbed.

The news spread and all Velanadi flocked to him in sympathy. Vyakula, the dolorous, her face lengthened to its longest, went to Sani Glass Odayan, her invariable counsellor in times of stress. Sani Glass was ready with advice. "Complain to the Police. That is the first thing to do," he said.

"Will they put Elsie in jail?" asked Maria Susai, in a fright.

"Not her. But they will jail the fellow she ran away with," comforted Sani Glass.

"But supposing she went with him willingly?" pursued Maria Susai.

"Don't talk like a defence lawyer. Leave it all to me."

"Leave it all to him," snarled Vyakula Mary. "It is this eternal arguing which has brought us all to this pass."

Maria Susai held his tongue.

They complained; Sani Glass gave the details and added, off his own bat, that Elsie was a minor under sixteen. Maria Susai was going to protest but Sani Glass nudged him under the table in time. He explained later that if they made her out to be a minor, even her consent would not avail Moses. Sani Glass had picked up many odds and ends of law in a lifetime of law agency.

They searched for the runaway pair. Sani Glass and a constable tracked them down to a cinema at Kalparai and brought them home. Elsie was gloriously unrepentant; she faced the curious Velanadi crowd almost hilariously; the sensation and the legal proceedings only added to the zest of the holiday. It was when she looked at her father's wan face that her mind misgave her. But, recovering herself, she said, "Don't fret, father dear. Let me marry Moses and everything will be right."

Maria Susai was taken aback; here was an ideal solution of what seemed a hopeless tangle. Moses was a good fellow, upstanding, steady, well-conducted... One might go further and fare worse. A new look came on Maria Susai's face. But Sani Glass and Vyakula Mary saw that look and did not suffer it to remain there. To overlook the offence and allow the marriage would be the end of the family reputation. So they argued, Sani Glass with subtle craft, and Vyakula Mary with virtuous intakings of breath. And Maria Susai, as usual, gave in.

They made a case of it. The case went up to Sessions. And Velanadi gave itself a holiday. Never since the murder of Meikole, the toll-gate keeper's wife, had there been a case so rich in sensation.

Old Arokiasami engaged a lawyer for his slandered nephew. The lawyer, who knew his job, told him the case would turn on Elsie's evidence.

"But they are not examining her," said Arokiasami.

"They are. They are taking out a summons to her. I hope she will not give her lover away."

"She will not, sir. Such a thing will never happen."

"It has happened before. No harm in being careful," replied the lawyer drily.

The case came on. Vyakula Mary went into the box and swore that Elsie was just under sixteen. There was no birth-certificate—they were not too particular about registering births at Velanadi—and a doctor would not have been of much help seeing that the difference was a matter of only a few weeks. And Vyakula Mary was so virtuous-looking and so palpably distressed that the Judge was impressed. Maria Susai followed his wife into the box and bungled about Elsie's age.

Meanwhile, Elsie was being worked upon. Vyakula Mary, with her endless repinings and assertions of readiness to die of shame, drove Elsie mad. Sani Glass said little; more by gestures than by express words he made it clear that if she failed her father, they would certainly run him in for bringing a false charge. The aunt from Vazhamangalam, simple soul, not understanding the drift of it all, begged her with tears in her eyes, to save herself and the family from dishonour. But what played havoc with her resolution was the silent misery in her father's eyes. Hating it all, wishing she were dead, her mind all in rags, she went into the box and told her tale—a fairy one. The gist of it was—and they dragged it out of her as only lawyers know how to do—that Moses lured her to the station at Vazhamangalam and then took her forcibly to Kalparai. Why did she not shout? She was far too frightened. The words came out slowly and the judge could hardly hear her. "Clever actor" said Moses' lawyer in a stage whisper. "Stage fright," the judge's eyes seemed to say. Elsie, the picture of injured innocence, stood with her eyes glued to the ground. The judge, whom the suspicion of tears on a pretty face was generally enough to knock off his balance, believed her version and gave judgment against Moses. He did not believe Elsie was a minor—"the prosecution case in that regard was an exaggeration," but he had "no doubts whatever that she had been forcibly abducted by the accused who was a designing scoundrel." He sentenced Moses to twelve months' hard labour. And Moses, with one last look at Elsie, sitting under the *illuppai* tree, walked to the jail looking like a dog that had lost its master.

III

And so the solemn farce was played out. Vyakula Mary, Sani Glass and the rest of them went home triumphant. Vyakula Mary bore herself with restraint;

her virtue shone like a shaken torch. But the honours belonged to Sani Glass; he was the conquering hero and hailed as such. Only a heroine was wanting to complete the picture and Sani Glass, bold as brass, went to Vyakula Mary and claimed his reward, Elsie Mary. Would she give her to him?

Vyakula Mary possessed tact. It would never do to hustle Elsie, so she spoke to her husband. Maria Susai could not stomach the idea. "We cannot give her to him, Vyakula, he is old enough to be her father," he protested.

"Beggars cannot be choosers," replied Vyakula Mary, sententiously.

"Beggars?"

"Worse. Nobody will take Elsie. She is damaged goods, please to remember," said Vyakula and closed her mouth like a rat-trap.

Elsie, she knew, would be a harder nut to crack. Taunts and shafts of abuse glanced off her like arrows striking a steel corslet. Vyakula changed her *modus operandi*. She was now sweet to Elsie, called her a wronged girl, a little too trustful, perhaps, but sound at heart. Just like her, said Velanadi, a mother in a thousand. Whoever would think she was only Elsie's step-mother?

The gossips were intrigued. What would be the next act in the drama? Would Elsie now cease her tomboyishness and settle down with Sani Glass for a husband, they asked at tank, church and *shandy*. It seemed she would—and she went down in their estimation; fickle, like a woman, said Velanadi *nem con.*

"Is it true, Elsie, that you are going to marry Sani Glass Odayan?" asked Arokia Mary, the catechist's daughter.

"Won't it be jolly?" asked Elsie, beaming.

"Well, you know best. But, is not he a bit old, dear?"

"The older, the better, darling," said Elsie.

"Clever girl. Knows when her game is up," was Velanadi's verdict when Arokia Mary reported the conversation.

The case was over in July and Elsie had asked Vyakula to wait till Michaelmas. And when September came round she asked for another couple of months to think it over. Vyakula Mary decided to humour her. At the same time she sounded a note of warning. "Take your own time, dear. But we must strike while the iron is hot."

"No fear, mother dear. Uncle Sani Glass will never cool off," said Elsie, not behindhand in sweetness.

December came and Sani Glass grew impatient. Elsie pleaded for another month's respite. "But, why, Elsie, my child?" asked Maria Susai, one latish evening in December. "What is going to happen in a month?"

"I don't know, father," replied Elsie truthfully.

"Then why don't you take him and be done with it?"

"I really don't know, father."

Maria Susai, the wool of his mind not being equal to further parley, gave it up.

And Elsie really did not know. She only knew she did not want the egregious Sani Glass. And she did want Moses, she wanted him more than ever. The picture of her fancy, blurred for a while during the horror of the trial, came back to her. With a difference, however. There stood Moses in the back garden, a look of mild reproach in his eyes, and yet he gathered her in his arms, the same as before. The tears welled up within her and she sobbed as she had never sobbed before. Would her day dreams come true? Was it possible that her lover would come back, take her in his arms and say, "I forgive you, child?" He had called her 'child' at Kalparai, not child exactly, for the word had dissolved in the shower of kisses to which it was the prelude. She seemed to know the answer. It was all a vain hope; it would remain an unrealised dream, an accusing might-have-been. Even supposing, by a miracle, he relented, would they let him marry her? The Church mightn't allow it. Could she ask Father Gomez? No, she daren't. In her trouble she prayed to her patron saintess, Mary of Lourdes, to heal her in mind and body, as Mary of Lourdes alone could do.

Meanwhile, Moses languished in jail. His hair was cropped close, they put him into a convict's uniform, but Moses did not mind all that. There were still six months to run, six weary months of Elsieless dreariness, to be followed by, God alone knew, how many years of Elsieless dreariness.

Early in December there was trouble in the jail. The reasons for it we need not pause to explore; there was the very devil of a row and the revolting prisoners smashed the jailor's head. It would have been worse but Moses had intervened and saved the jailor from an untimely end and the prisoners from hanging. Moses was a favourite with the prisoners for he used to help them with their clandestine letters and other enterprises barred by the jail code. The upshot of it all was that a gratified Collector recommended the remission of the unexpired portion of Moses' sentence. And just before Christmas, Moses was released from jail. And he made a bee-line for Velanadi.

It was Christmas eve and *shandy* day at Velanadi. All the men were there and all the Maries, the plain and the adjectival ones. Elsie was flitting about from stall to stall, buying brinjals, snake-gourd and bright red tomatoes. Some one asked her when she was going to marry. "Very soon, now," cheerily responded Elsie, as she stood on a rising bit of ground which overlooked the Poppali-Vazhamangalam road. Just then she saw a man approaching; there was a forward lurch in his gait which was oddly familiar but no hair clustered round his temples, so it must have been only her imagination. The man came nearer and Elsie saw an all-too-familiar coat of grey flannel—or, was it *khaddar?*—with the pleated pockets in front. Elsie sprang forward with a glad cry and the man held out his arms, while his lips seemed to frame—for nobody heard—the magic word, 'Elsie'. And while Elsie snuggled and sobbed in those great, big arms of his, there were delighted shouts of 'Moses, Moses', 'Our Moses has come.' And though the good people of Velanadi did not generally approve of public love-making, for once they forgot to be punctilious and looked on, some with tears in their eyes. For Moses, they had remembered, was a man aftert heir own heart, who used to do errands for them on his trips to town. And they had realised with heart-searching that they had not reached out a helping hand to him during his trial. But, thank Heaven, it was all over and done with. Moses, disentangling himself from a closely clinging Elsie, took her basket and moved forward. Elsie, all her modesty cast to the winds, linked her arms to his and walked on as though her man had just returned from the wars. Nambikkai Mary and her brood, censorious to the last, muttered, "Wanton: shameless creature!" and looked so sour that your teeth rattled. Father Gomez came along in his double-bullock *bandy*, bound for Vazhamangalam which lay in his *pangu*. And they told him the news.

Father Gomez smiled an understanding smile. He muttered to himself, "Whom God has joined......"

Maria Susai, who was in the meat-stall, came forward on hearing the news. His tread was heavy, his heart heavier. He saw rocks ahead—Vyakula Mary, Sani Glass, his gang of ready-made witnesses. Dazed, drifting out to sea, beginning to feel helpless, he came forward and bowed low to the priest.

"It is all right, Maria Susai. It is all as it should be. Arrange to have the banns said. You might have gone further and fared worse," said Father Gomez.

"But Sani Glass—"

"Oh, Sani Glass knows when he has shot his bolt. Don't worry, Maria Susai, and let me wish you a merry Christmas," said Father Gomez and asked his bandy-man to drive on.

And if Maria Susai felt that this was the maddest, merriest Christmas he had ever had, how can you blame him?

A SERMON IN MARBLE

IT was domestic unhappiness—so, at any rate, he termed it—which drove Kodandaram from home. There were those who said it was sheer *ennui* and nothing more; evidently he was tired of the profitless existence of a provincial lawyer and craved for change. Anyway, one fine morning in May he packed his suit-case—a doting father-in-law's wedding-gift—and without a word to anybody started for the north of India. There was no particular reason why it should have been the north instead of the east or the west; it was just that it was far enough off to make his demonstration of disgust with the home and the family sufficiently convincing. A minor factor was Kanaka, an old college friend, now said to be happily and modernly employed in a Swadeshi drug-store in Delhi. Kanaka used to be a taking sort of girl and he vaguely hoped that something might 'turn up' in the way of prohibited romance.

Why he should have felt bored with existence at Kil-Kedaram was not clear to anybody. There he was, J. Kodandaram, M.A.B.L., as his name-board announced (that M.A. gave him a pleasant sense of superiority to the mere B.A.'s), with a roof to his head—and a terraced one at that — a *veli* of excellent land and a wife, not fit, by any means, to be the heroine of a modern novel but good-looking and loving enough. True, Kodandaram wasn't a star in his profession: his clients you could count on your fingers and, as for his income, what he made hardly sufficed to keep him in socks and neck-ties. This he did not very much mind as there was no wolf to keep from the door and it gave him something to philosophise over, namely, the unreason which attends professional success. He had no children but this did not worry him; he had, as yet, no thoughts of the life hereafter and he found the present sufficiently absorbing.

It was, on the whole, a peptonised existence which he was leading and the story of domestic discord sounded a bit thin. His grouse was against his wife. She was old-fashioned and would not play up to him, and all the cinemas in and out of Kil-Kedaram could not change her, such a stick-in-the-mud was she. But the good people of Kil-Kedaram thought differently; they considered her a nice, sweet and thoroughly good girl, who lit up the home like the tall, burnished brass lamp one sets up before the family gods. But Kodandaram, I am sorry to say, saw only what was not there, the modernity, the lack of which seemed to him to make matrimony flat and flavourless. She was out and out unmodern, to the very edges of her *sari* which she could never bring herself to wear in the form of a skirt. And her name! Picchai! It made him blush. It meant 'Alms' and was the way in which her parents, heirs to ages of superstition, had tried to make their peace with the destiny which had relentlessly struck down all her predecessors. Kodandaram bestowed another name on her, *Lilavati*, romantic, aromatic, regal. But 'Lilavati' made her blush, it was so uncommon, so theatrical. She hardly answered to the name but just sidled along, like one ashamed, meekly drawing the folds of her *sari* round her shoulders. There again, why eternally draw a veil over one's shoulders! And Picchai had beautifully-rounded shoulders over which her cream-coloured skin glowed with life. She didn't fancy walking along the streets of Kil-Kedaram (so notoriously conservative and given to gossip) with her husband, and when she did, she trailed a few paces behind him. Modesty? Dash it all, he used to say, there's no modesty in hanging back like a dog instead of walking abreast like a wife and partner. And, latterly—she had taken to reading the *Santosha Vikatan* regularly and the *Santosha Vikatan* hardly helped to kick a woman into the middle of next week. Though she didn't shrick with delight reading it as her volatile friend and neighbour Janaki did, she enjoyed it in a quiet, undemonstrative way, which was her way in all things, including love of husband.

The last straw had been a trifle, the merest trifle. They were going to a wedding in town, a fashionable wedding, one certain to be reported in the newspapers. There was already a certain amount of strain and when Picchai appeared with her diamond-studded *bulak*, Kodandaram asked superiorly, "Is it absolutely necessary that you should wear that thing in your nose ?"

His sarcasm was lost on her. She just tossed her head and asked, "What is wrong with it ?"

"It makes you look like your grand-mother," he said icily.

"Let it. It must be nice," she answered composedly.

Answering back! The almighty male in him rose in offended dignity but he controlled himself. Picchai could be very firm in matters relating to dress and jewellery. Kodandaram didn't realise that in this, at any rate, she was up to the most advanced modern standard. And here he was, trying to suppress her individuality, not a very modern thing to do, as he realised with a start. But, that *bulak*, it made her look so 'dowdy'.

They went to the Patels in silence. Picchai went and joined the throng of women, while Kodandaram drank weak tea with a motley crowd, feeling quite fashionable and up-to-date. Picchai, retiring and shy, had been quite a success in her own way. "A pretty picture," the missionary's wife had remarked. The Collector's lady had asked to be introduced to her and had fingered her "*bulak*", which sparkled in the electric light, and exclaimed, "Isn't it lovely ? And it suits you down to the ground." Kodandaram who heard of it said that Mrs. Collector must have only been trying to be pleasant. No Englishwoman could like that kind of thing. He had not been within ten feet of an Englishwoman and yet he supposed that they did not care for pearls or diamonds.

They quarrelled over it that night, Kodandaram speaking out of pique and irritated by Picchai's tears which were really designed to appease. He moped the whole of the next day and then left for Madras without telling anybody. He caught the Grand Trunk Express for Delhi, travelling third-class, dressed in khaki shorts, a Phillips Oppenheim novel in his hand, while his 'natty' suit-case was stowed away among the steel-trunks and cloth-bundles which blocked the passage. He was without remorse and felt on the edge of high adventure. However, he had not been twelve hours in the train before he realised that travelling across the blistering plains of Central India in May was not a joke. The food was abominable and the coffee, when he could get it, smelt of kerosene. On the second day, he thought longingly of the square-bricked floor of the dining-room at home where Picchai used to tempt him with spicy soups and *chutneys*. She did certainly look after him and rivalled his dead mother in the way in which she provided home comforts. A good wife, but, no, he checked himself in time. After all, he reminded himself, man does not live by bread alone. But the reflection was only a temporary palliative. Soon he felt the the needed sustenance cannot always be obtained from a Biblical quotation.

II

Delhi in May was the depth of discomfort, Hot winds shrivelled up the skin. Kodandaram stayed with Ganapati Sastri, a middle-aged gentleman, tied to his office-stool between ten and six and to the cares of a large-sized family after that. Kodandaram was thus left to his own devices and he lost no time in looking for Kanakamma. He ran her to earth in a third-rate drug-store near the Kashmir Gate and was somewhat taken aback by the decline in her appearance. But she seemed pleased to see him and stood talking to him over the counter in a salmon-coloured *sari* and a very much abbreviated bodice, while a shrunken-looking individual in a black cap kept shouting orders at her from the cash-desk. Kanakamma arranged to go to the pictures with him; she had always liked them and they were showing "A Night in Town" at the Regal and Pattabhi left promising to meet her there.

After the show, they strolled along the Chandni Chowk and ate sweets at Ganga Ram's and drank iced *sherbet* at a stall at the turning into the Chauri Bazar. Kanaka laughingly cautioned Kodanda against venturing into that street alone and pointed to the painted courtesans who displayed themselves on the balconies above.

"What are those red and blue quilts spread there for ?" asked Kodandaram.

"I presume to receive visitors on," she said engagingly. "How easy and unaffected ! Kanaka was never a prude," said Kodandaram to himself.

During the rest of the week they explored Delhi. Kanaka knew her way about and took him to all the show places. At the Lal Kila, Kanaka reeled off the points of Shah Jahan's Palace with the mechanical enthusiasm of a tourists' guide. Old Delhi, Firozabad, Indraprasth were all visited and Kodandaram thought Kanaka a wonderful woman to go about with.

She got a Friday afternoon off and they made an excursion to the Kutb Minar. It was a sweltering day and by the time they had 'done' the Kutb, they were both tired out. On their way back they halted at Humayun's tomb over whose architectural elegance Kanaka waxed eloquent.

"Isn't it wonderful ?" she asked.

"I don't think so at all. So much money wasted on the sepulchre of a man who was not much good while living."

"All that has nothing to do with the building. They all speak highly of it." said Kanaka.

"Anyhow it bores me. All palaces or tombs or mosques. I wonder if those Padshahs ever thought of the people. There does not seem to be any sign of a hospital or school or things of that kind," said Kodanda.

"There may have been such things in Akbar's time."

"What did Akbar build ?" asked Kodanda, indolently.

"I don't remember," admitted Kanaka."

"Nor do I," said Kodandaram. Their history was hazy.

They were glad to be back in the car and they drove back in silence. The sight of Delhi city and the prospect of tea revived Kodandaram. They went into Ganga Ram's again and then Kodandaram dropped Kanaka at her 'flat' as she called it, at Paharganj.

"I am afraid you have not enjoyed your trip," said Kanaka.

"On the contrary. I have enjoyed every minute of it. With you for company it could not have been otherwise," replied Kodandaram now thoroughly revived.

"Flatterer," said Kanaka, arching her neck.

"Honour bright," replied Kodanda, drawing himself up.

After dinner they met again at Connaught Place. Kodanda was transported by the electric illuminations which seemed to him to turn it into a fairyland. A gentle breeze was blowing and they strolled along leisurely and dropped into Lilaram's. "What are you taking home for your wife?" asked Kanaka.

"I am sure I haven't thought about it," replied Kodandaram, feeling guilty.

"Bad man. I shall select a nice *sari* or two for you to take home," she said, pleasantly.

Saris were taken down from the shelves for Kanaka's inspection. Kodanda looked on and after some time told her that not one of the *saris* shown would suit his wife.

"She is so old-fashioned, you know," he said, miserable at having to apologise for her. Then, as some suppressed sense of loyalty gave his conscience a twinge, he added. "I do not wish to inflict my tastes on her, you know."

"Quite right, too," Kanaka readily agreed. "She has a right to her own tastes."

"Hadn't she?" Kodanda supposed she had. Here was a new and not unsuspected light on the question. But he was not in a mood to puzzle it out. The shop assistant waited for some custom to follow all the eager inspection which had been going on. Kanaka seemed to be taken up with a pale green *sari* bordered with silver lace.

"Do you like that ?" asked Kodanda. Kanaka sensed what was coming and countered:

"But what is the use ? Your wife, you say does not care for this kind of thing ?"

"Now, tell me, do you like it ?"

"I do, indeed. It's a lovely *sari*. Take it home and give it to your sister.

"I haven't one."

"Or a lady friend," she said, simpering.

"Right. Let's have it. My lady friend is here," he finished.

"I shouldn't dream of it, Kodanda. You are—"

Kodanda did not allow her to complete her sentence. Instead, he told the assistant to make up the bill and the parcel.

On coming outside Kanaka continued her pretty remonstrances.

"What will your wife say if she hears of this ?" she asked.

"Let her say what she likes. I don't care," he replied loftily.

A bright moon was shining overhead, the traffic in Connaught Place had virtually ceased and all the illuminations seemed meant for them.

"You bad boy," said Kanaka, handing Kondandaram the parcel to carry. And Kodandaram thought he heard a sigh floating away on the night air. He turned to her, when she asked him :

"I am going to ask you a question. Will you promise to answer truly ?"

"Fire away," he said, his eyes sparkling.

"Have you been happy loafing about with me all these days?"

"Happy is not the word for it. It has been heavenly. How can I thank you, Kanaka?"

She nestled closer to him while her hands sought his. "How can I thank you!" she whispered.

It was now Kodanda's turn. He asked her:

"Now tell me, have I been a tiresome person to go about with?"

"Tiresome? Don't be silly," she said and slapped him on his cheek.

"Slap me again, Kanaka. It is nice to be silly, I find," he said gallantly.

"Say something silly and I shall slap you again," she said and held up her face to him. Kodanda completely lost his head. Before he realised what he was doing he had caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately on the lips. In an instant, he recovered himself, stepped back and, in a fever of anxiety lest he should have offended her, started to apologise.

"Don't please," she interrupted. "But what will your wife say?"

"Oh, hang my wife. But are you angry, Kanaka? Will you forgive me?" After all, Kodanda was rooted in the proprieties.

"What's there to forgive, you silly boy?" she said playing with the edge of her *sari*.

Kodanda couldn't believe his ears. He looked her full in the face for a second and then gathering her in his arms, covered her face with kisses. Her hair came down and she drew back her head to put up her hair again. Kodanda had still a stray qualm or two. He asked:

"It's delightful. Are you sure you don't mind?"

She shook her head.

* * * * *

With the morning came a depression of spirits. Somehow he felt amazingly below par and his thoughts went back with a curious insistence to his wife. How was she feeling at home, he wondered. A spasm of guilt shot through his mind; he had failed his wife, a wife who had always given him of her best. He felt as though some sustaining fibre within him had snapped at some point, leaving him wrecked, miserable, ashamed of himself.

They were having a small celebration at his host's—the birthday of his grandson. It was a pretty, little affair, like the ones they used to have at home. Ganapati Sastri's daughter, a smiling, happy-looking young lady of about seventeen was a picture of joyous motherhood. She didn't romp about, her style of wearing her *sari* was strictly orthodox and though she did not wear a *bulak*, she wore a nose-screw, a single, small diamond and all present voted her pretty. How much nicer was Picchai with her derided *bulak!*

He wasn't meeting Kanaka that day as she had work at her store but they were going to Agra the next day to see the Taj. That evening Kodanda went off by himself to collect curios to take home. He discovered, by one of those lucky accidents to which some travellers are born, a curio shop in an obscure alley off Chandni Chowk. There were brassware and miniatures in stone of the Taj, the Lal Kila, the Kutb and other buildings. But the thing which enslaved his fancy was a painting on mica of Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of the

Emperor Shah Jahan. It was about six inches by four but the picture seemed to pulsate with life. It was a lovely portrait of a lovely woman and the loveliness both of the subject and the portrait had not been spoiled, but, seemed rather enhanced, by the *bulak* which depended from the delicatest of noses. Besides the *bulak*, there was a *besari* and a none too tiny nose-screw. He paid what his host said was an absurdly high price for it. It was probably a feeling of remorse which made him detect a faint resemblance in the features of the Empress to his wife or it may have been the suggestion due to the *bulak*. Whatever that may have been, Kodandaram considered it a valuable find and determined to treasure it.

III

The B. B. & C. I. train deposited Kodanda and Kanaka at Agra at the unholy hour of noon. They wasted about an hour among the purlieus of the station looking for a hotel where they could get something to eat. At last a *tonga*-driver undertook to take them to a '*pust-kloss*' hotel on the Taj road and actually brought them to a vermin-ridden hole of a place whose proprietor promised to send up breakfast in five minutes. It was actually one hour in arriving and unappetising when it did. They sent it away untasted and started for the Taj Mahal. Dirty, bedraggled and soaked in sweat, they drove along the dreariest approach conceivable to a magnificent building. A little later, they turned into a more promising-looking avenue and arrived at the red sand-stone gate which leads to the mausoleum. The scroll-writing struck Kodanda as wonderfully well preserved but he was anxious to see the Taj and hurried forward. As they emerged into the open and walked along the cypress-edged waterway paved with marble and saw the reflection of the Taj in the water, his spirits rose. They went into the vault where

Shah Jahan and the woman he loved lay side by side, and then came out into the open, Kodanda feeling revived, ecstatic and exalted in mind. He went near one of the minarets and viewed the Taj from an angle from which new beauties were revealed. He was lucky in his guide, who seemed to have the gift of silence, rare in one whose business is commonly one continuous chatter. Probably he was a discerning judge of patrons; he merely murmured, "You must see it by moonlight, Sahib. You must come to-night at ten. The moon is near her third quarter."

"I will come," said Kodanda.

Kanaka had her jug of cold water ready. "What about going back to Delhi?" she asked.

"Delhi can wait unless you are very particular," replied Kodanda.

They went into the Fort and found the going very tedious. Kanaka followed listlessly. They went up to the room overlooking the Jumna where Shah Jahan was brought in his dying moments so that he could die with his eyes resting on the Taj. Kodanda lay down to locate the position most suitable for the purpose. "Don't fall in love with the shades of Mumtaz Mahal," joked Kanaka.

There was a tiny mirror in the wall through which the Taj was visible in lovely tints. Kanaka wanted to have a look and as she wasn't tall enough, Kodanda lifted her up gingerly. She clung to him and, as he dropped her, kissed him on the cheek.

"When I die, will you build a tomb for me like this, Kodanda."

"I hope not," replied Kodanda.

"Meaning?" asked Kanaka in hurt tones.

"I hoped you wouldn't die."

"I see," said Kanaka pettishly.

She was taking too much for granted, thought Kodanda. On the way back to Agra city, Kanaka was monosyllabic in her talk. Kodanda, not unthankful, was busy with his own thoughts. He took out the miniature of Mumtaz Mahal and scrutinised it while Kanaka went to her room. It was curiously reminiscent of Picchai.

When Kodanda asked Kanaka to accompany him to the Taj at ten o'clock that night, she pleaded a headache and stayed behind. Kodanda, refreshed by a cold bath and a tolerable meal, could already sense enjoyment ahead. The same dismal approach again and Kodanda thought it must be the Moghul version of the rich man and the gates of Heaven. The guide conducted Kodanda to a point from which he could drink in the eerie beauty of the mausoleum.

The moon was overhead and lit up the dome in dream-colours. It was a haven of peace, a monument of eternal love which seemed to enshrine an Emperor's example for the emulation of the world. Kodanda took out the miniature and wondered what manner of woman Mumtaz Mahal was that could so hold the love of a monarch who could collect women like bunches of flowers. Was it beauty of person? Picchai was-er, not exactly beautiful. But dress her up like a queen, in silks and laces and diamonds, she would pass muster among the beauties of Kil-Kedaram. The Collector's wife was not trying to be pleasant, he was now persuaded. Picchai was not nineteen but she was 'tall and stately'. He seemed to have been a fool over that *bulak*. What was good for an Emperor must be good enough for him. All the fuss he had made over that jewel now struck him as a piece of folly. And so apparently, were his objections to her other manners and modes. Wasn't Mumtaz's devotion to the Emperor that was at the root of his unalterable love? And Picchai, who more self-less, so eager to smooth the path of her husband in life? And he had come away from her like a deserter from the post of duty? And for what? To debase himself with a flirt like Kanaka? And yet he did not wish to judge her harshly. Who knew what secret disappointment her young life held? He had lapsed, been an awful fool. Still, thank Heaven, it was his first lapse and he hoped it would be his last.

What would Picchai be doing at the moment? Doubtless she was in bed, unable to get a wink of sleep for thinking of him. Or, perhaps, like the *Yaksha's* wife in Kalidasa's Cloud-messenger, she was dreaming of him. She was sure to be sleeping upstairs in that loft-like place which served them for a spare room by day and a bed-room by night. His thoughts made a bee-line for home. Mumtaz Mahal! What was her hold over the Emperor? Beauty, of course. Service? Hardly any, perhaps. Not so Picchai. Hers was not the face which would launch a hundred ships, let alone a thousand, but it could bring him, Kodanda, to heel. Her eyes had a soft allure - the *bulak*, if one came to think of it - did assist in that allurement which he could never resist, but her strong point was her devotion to him. How she used to anticipate his wants! Up long before dawn, even before the milk arrived, she used to seduce him from bed with his early coffee. And how he had missed his coffee since he had left Madras! And Northern Indian coffee was undrinkable! She prepared his bath and his food and even looked after his clothes for him. She used to dust his books regularly, a regular parlourmaid and wife in one. And those little daily tiffs and triumphs! She used to ask him after breakfast, just before he left for court, what he would like for tiffin and he used to say, 'Just coffee' but if she took him at his word and sent him only coffee, he would come home and blame her for starving him. Citing his orders rarely improved his temper. However, she would give him some 'snack', get him into a good humour and emerge triumphant. What a gem of a woman, and what a cad was he to desert her in the way he had done!

Mumtaz Mahal! She couldn't have been a patch on his Picchai. If he were an Emperor, he would not build a mausoleum over her grave but he would deck her in diamonds and gold and emeralds and build schools and hospitals in her name while she was yet undead. What an imbecile fool he had been to have fallen out with her! He must hurry home and make it up. He savoured the reconciliation in fancy. "Oh, blessings on the falling out, that all the more endears......"

It was long past midnight when, in breach of the rules, the guide let him out.

Next morning, even before the telegraph assistant at Agra Cantonment had finished dusting his apartment, Kodanda handed in the following telegram:

"Leaving Delhi to-morrow, Shall be home Friday.

Love. Kodanda."

NON - CO - OPERATION

It is one of the canons of British Indian administration — so the initiated say — that the magistracy and the Police should move on the best of terms. By personal conferences and otherwise the D. S. P. should keep the District Magistrate informed of all that goes on in the district, while the latter, in his turn, should help the former with friendly advice and co-operation. This, however, does not mean that they should be crossing each other's path or butting in at every turn with advice; if they did, things would degenerate into a bad joke. I have no doubt there is an appropriate G. O. making this point clear; "Undue interference on the part of the magistracy is deprecated" etc., etc., or something on those lines.

Now, it was either accident or Fate which brought Brocklehurst, the District Magistrate, and Mohiuddin Rafi, the D. S. P. together in the district of Poppali. Brocklehurst, being a Civilian whose auctioneering ancestry had become blurred by too long a stay in the East, called it Fate. That seemed to him to best describe the conjunction of those unanalysed forces which apparently governed such matters. Rafi, modern and iconoclastic, preferred to call it accident. Certainly it was a Government Order which effected the juxtaposition; in fact, they were sending Rafi to Chitragunta and Mellor to Poppali, but a clerk telescoped the two proposals with the result that Rafi came to Poppali and Mellor went to Chitragunta. Rafi was right, it was an accident; or, who knows, why not Fate?

Rafi had been six months at Poppali when Brocklehurst took over. They soon met, apparently in an inauspicious moment, for they didn't hit it off.

Brocklehurst was a huge, heavy-featured, heavy-mannered man, who generally spoke as though he was addressing a public meeting. It was very long since he had been in a district; his path had taken him over varied ground; recruiting, Customs, plague duty, with a spell in the Secretariat, where he had made himself a nuisance with his theories. Now, his own wish had been to put in a few years in some quiet, soft job but the Chief Secretary had set his face against it and said, "Time that the old proser took off his coat and did some work." Brocklehurst considered himself very ill-used and wrote home to his wife, "Fawcett has got his teeth into me. He wants me to take off my coat — as if I have ever had it on — and do some hard work — as if I have ever done anything else! Well, my dear, don't expect anything from human nature and you won't be disappointed. This is a dismal hell of a place, made over to Indian officers, and things are naturally in a mess. I think I shall have to take off my shirt as well and clean things up a bit and I will show them how to do it." Brocklehurst had a good conceit of himself and believed he could take on any job from general bottlewasher to bishop. That's the I. C. S. ideal, isn't it? And Brocklehurst came to Poppali determined to show them that he could run a district as well as he could collect plague statistics or Customs revenue.

Rafi called on him one morning just as Brocklehurst had finished breakfast; Brocklehurst kept him waiting for a few minutes before sending for him into his office. In solemn tones, he asked him about the state of the district, its crime, its political activities. Rafi, a well-set-up, good-looking young man, rather sharp-featured, said that crime was up to its normal level and as for politics, they were in a rather sleepy hollow.

"I suppose there are a few non-co-operators about?" asked Brocklehurst.

"Just a handful and harmless," replied Rafi.

"Who is the leader of the crowd?"

"One Jalamuri Jalpeswara Pantulu, a Ramdrug newspaper man."

"The most venomous of the lot, I presume?"

"By no means. A good-humoured fellow with just a monkey trick or two. Likes the sound of his own voice and comes out with a speech now and again. Just beats the air for a bit, that's all."

"I shouldn't allow speeches at all, Mr. Rafi," said Brocklehurst ponderously. "They are the very devil. They sow the seeds of disaffection and end in a crop of troubles for us in the long run."

Rafi digested the creed Brocklehurst enunciated. "I do not expect any trouble at the present moment. However—"

Brocklehurst lifted a questioning eyebrow. "I do not share your optimism, Mr. Rafi. I look upon such men as potentially very dangerous. Anyway, I expect you to keep me very thoroughly informed of all that is happening. Remember, Mr. Rafi, you are my eyes and ears."

"I shall not forget that I am those useful appendages, Mr. Brocklehurst," said Rafi.

He looked innocent enough as he sat there fingering his Sam Browne belt, but Brocklehurst was not sure the answer was not a trifle cheeky. Shortly afterwards, Rafi got up, saluted and left.

"Conceited young puppy," was Brocklehurst's unspoken comment.

"Pompous old ass," was Rafi's tactless assertion at the Club.

Not a very promising beginning. And the weeks that followed marked no improvement. Brocklehurst got in Rafi's way at every turn; he was constantly shooting questions at him on every subject under the sun from a dirty scabbard or a constable in a threadbare tunic in an out-of-the-way outpost to the discrepancies in evidence beloved of lawyers and on which magistrates wrecked police cases. He got on Rafi's nerves and when the I. G. came to Poppali, Rafi took his troubles to him. The I. G. smiled an understanding smile and said:

"That's Bud Brocklehurst all over. He has had a grouse against the Police ever since the Darzidrug riots. He thinks they let him down over them. Not a bad fellow by any means and quite easy to manage."

But Rafi was not much good at managing; he had no taste for greasing the machinery; no wonder, then, the going proved heavy, with jars and jolts all along the line.

Brocklehurst was a stolid enough sort of person but the non-co-operation bee was buzzing in his brain. Not long after he had come to Poppali, he heard a bird whisper that a few volunteers were coming over from Chitragunta to manufacture salt on the Poppali coast and give a lead to the local non-co-operators. He rang up Rafi and asked him about it. Rafi replied it was a mere bazaar rumour and that there was nothing in it. Brocklehurst declined to be impressed; the sneer in his voice sounded thick through the telephone. "I do not brush aside these bazaar rumours in that way, Mr. Rafi; these bazaar rumours have a knack of coming true."

A few days later Brocklehurst met Rafi at the Club.

"Have you done anything about those Chitragunta volunteers, Rafi?" he asked.

"I have written to Mellor about them and he will let me know if there is anything doing." replied Rafi.

"Mellor may be all right but what about Mudrabone? I hear the *bundobust* is that they should come through Mudrabone."

Mudrabone was an Indian State which was wedged in between Chitragunta and Poppali. Brocklehurst had no opinion of these 'native states' as he preferred to call them. Rafi replied that Mudrabone was run much better than the adjoining British Indian districts a heresy to which Brocklehurst refused to subscribe; he closed the conversation by curtly cautioning Rafi to keep his eyes and ears open and not to bank too heavily on Mudrabone.

The salt-making had been fixed for a Wednesday and, as it drew near, Brocklehurst was in a fever of anxiety. Rafi was unworried; however, he posted a few police pickets at the point where the road to Parvati Point crossed the Mudrabone road. But he was worried about something else; he was scanning the eastern skies anxiously, for trouble was brewing in that quarter. At Ramdrug, at the other end of the district, the Christians and the Hindus were at daggers drawn; the former had built a Church to St. Mary of Dolores and the consecration had been fixed for the identical day assigned to the salt Satyagrâha. The Christians, to signalise the occasion, had arranged for a procession through the Main Street, past the Siva temple. The Hindus were up in arms against the proposal; such a thing had never happened before; and it was looked upon as a sacrilege. They applied to the local Magistrate for orders preventing the procession but the Magistrate declined to interfere. The Christians were more successful; they got orders restraining the Hindus from obstructing the procession. Defeated in every quarter, the Hindus approached Jalamuri Jalpeswara, who promptly advised them to sit tight in the middle of the street and not to budge.

"Suppose the Police remove us forcibly?" asked the Hindu leader.

"Go back as fast as you are removed," answered Jalpeswara.

"The Police may hit us," said some one among the crowd.

"We will hit back," stormed the Hindu leader, a stalwart cattle-breeder.

Jalpeswara looked at him admiringly but was conscientious to the last. "That will never do," he said. "Resist peacefully, by all means, but as for hitting back, *I* cannot advise that."

All this reached Rafi's ears and he knew there would be the very devil of a row at Ramdrug. When he returned home from the Club on Tuesday evening, he found a message waiting for him. It was from the police inspector at Ramdrug and said that things were getting out of hand and that a clash seemed inevitable. Rafi was quick to act; he sent a Reserve party in advance and decided to follow in person. He wished to see the District Magistrate before going, but Brocklehurst was at a planters' dinner and so he sent him a hastily-scribbled note instead. This was handed to Brocklehurst over the soup, just as he had settled down to talk with the lady on his right, an attractive blonde. Brocklehurst put the letter away in his pocket, intending to read it after dinner. The planters, I am told, do their guests uncommonly well and Brocklehurst was a good trencherman; it was late when they broke up that night and, Brocklehurst, I am sorry to say, forgot all about the letter, which continued to lie in his pocket unread. When Brocklehurst came down to breakfast the next morning, the day was far advanced; he finished breakfast quickly and started for Parvati Point, arriving there at about noon. He asked for the D. S. P. and when the Inspector on duty said that he hadn't arrived, Brocklehurst thundered.

"Where the devil is he?"

"I am told he has gone to Ramdrug, sir," replied the Inspector.

Brocklehurst glared. He could not believe his ears. He sent off a telegram to Rafi: "What are you doing at Ramdrug? Come at once."

The telegram was handed to Rafi at noon; he had had an exhausting day, trying to make peace between the contending parties. He swore as he read the telegram. He snatched a sheet of paper from his camp-table and, with a savage scowl on his face, wrote out a reply: "Am composing quarrels here; shall come as soon as possible; moreover, you should have said Please come."

Brocklehurst's temper had not been at its best the whole of that fierce morning in June; Rafi's wire did not improve it. The one thing which saved him from completely 'going off his bean' was the absence of the Chitragunta volunteers.

Rafi turned up at tea-time and saw Brocklehurst striding up and down the verandah of the *dak* bungalow like a caged lion. At sight of him, Brocklehurst roared:

"Where the devil have you been all this time?"

"At Ramdrug, having the devil of a time," said Rafi, in a voice to match.

Brocklehurst asked in a minor key, "Why didn't you let me know? I thought it had blown over."

"I sent you a note last night while you were at dinner," said Rafi.

The start which Brocklehurst gave pleased Rafi; it almost reconciled him to the rudeness of his reception. Brocklehurst, considerably toned down, asked for news and was relieved when Rafi told him that he had succeeded in making peace between the parties and that the procession had passed off quietly.

"Thank Heaven. It's a good day's work, Rafi, and I am very glad. Congratulations. Come and have a cup of tea," said Brocklehurst cheerfully.

"Excuse me, Brocklehurst. I think I shall have it in my tent. Thanks all the same," said Rafi.

"Offering me tea as a good conduct prize, I suppose the dam fool," said Rafi to himself.

"Sulky devil," muttered Brocklehurst, as he went in to tea.

While Rafi lay in a long chair sipping weak tea, a wire was handed to him from Ramdrug. It ran: "Terrible riots here. Komal Naicken killed. Police helpless. Rama Naik."

Rafi started and dropped the tea-cup which split in two. He sat in his chair and did some tense thinking. In a minute he was himself again and calling for another cup of tea, drank it leisurely. Before he had finished, he saw Brocklehurst's car crashing up the carriage drive. Brocklehurst himself jumped out of his car, raced up the verandah steps and waving a telegram in front of Rafi's face, asked him excitedly what it meant.

Rafi received it lazily. He said : " I think it is all a ramp. "

" Ramp !" snorted Brocklehurst. "I am not so sure about that. Something tells me, that something very serious has happened at Ramdrug. I think we had better start for Ramdrug immediately. "

" And leave Parvati Point to take care of itself !" said Rafi mischievously. Brocklehurst affected not to notice it.

They left immediately and at Brocklehurst's instance, Rafi ordered the Reserve party at Parvati Point to follow them in a bus. It seemed pretty obvious that the Chitragunta volunteers were not going to turn up.

The sun was going down in the west in a blaze of gold and yellow when they reached Ramdrug. " The heavens do not appear to have crashed, " said Rafi as they motored through the bazaar street to the police station. At the station, a Sub-Inspector gathered himself up and came forward adjusting his turban and tunic.

" Anything the matter here ?" asked Rafi.

" Nothing, sir. The rioters have all disappeared."

Brocklehurst thrust the telegram he had received in front of the Sub-Inspector's face. " What does this mean ?" he asked.

" It is all an exaggeration, sir. There was a trifling quarrel between Sannasi Odayan and Komal Naicken, that was all.

" Was Komal Naicken injured ?" asked Rafi.

"A few bruises, sir, that was all. "

Brocklehurst lost his temper. "How very casual! A town in turmoil, a riot narrowly averted, and when two fellows go and break the public peace, you sit tight with folded arms and say it was a trifling quarrel and that was all! It is ridiculous!"

The Sub-Inspector was dazed and could not find his voice.

"Where did they fight?" asked Rafi.

"In Sannasi Odayan's cocoanut *tope*, sir. If D. S. P. orders, I shall register a case and proceed against him."

"Proceed for what?" asked Rafi.

The Sub-Inspector did not answer; he had no idea and looked sheepish. A few more enquiries, and it transpired that the affair was nothing more than a private quarrel between Sannasi Odayan and Komal Naicken in the latter's cocoanut *tope* and that Komal Naicken's party were seen going towards Jalpeswara's house; Jalpeswara himself was seen, soon afterwards, going in the Poppali bus. Anyway, it was clear that the telegram was the usual kind of scare telegram which parties send to the authorities. Rafi was not sure that he did not see Jalpeswara's lean hand in the telegram.

When, at lamplighting time, Rafi suggested getting back to Poppali and seeing about a 'spot of dinner' Brocklehurst was fain to agree. It was nearly eight when they reached Poppali. But Brocklehurst's day of shocks hadn't run its course yet. As he was changing for dinner, a telegram from the police inspector at Poppali was handed to him. "Volunteers arrived six p. m. Gathered on seashore and proceeded manufacture salt. Police charged with *lathis* and dispersed crowd. Jalpeswara and seven others arrested."

Brocklehurst swore for all he was worth. However, he soon overcame his vexation ; he even smiled ; some deep-buried sense of humour was trying to assert itself as a last line of defence. It was with a sense of victory that he rang up Rafi and asked him :

“So the volunteers did materialise after all ?”

“But not from Chitragunta,” replied Rafi bleakly.

“How do you know ?”

“If they had come, we should have heard,” said Rafi with decision.

“Well, well, let us see. If there is anything doing you will let me know, won’t you ?”

“Certainly,” said Rafi.

Brocklehurst hung up the receiver and went away muttering. “Opinionated blighter.”

The next morning, the local Tamil paper, the *Prajamitran*, blazoned forth the news of the volunteers’ march to the sea, their attempted defiance of the salt law and its frustration by the forces of arbitrary rule. The Police Inspector turned up at Poppali, flourishing a photogragh of the volunteers in action ; under the legend, “The Watched Pot”, it showed a score of volunteers seated round pots and pans of seawater, set up on crude stoves of red laterite ; in their midst sat Jalpeswara, grinning from ear to ear. The Police version differed from the Press version materially but they agreed on one point, namely, the vigour of the *lathi* charge by police ; on its alleged unimaginable cruelty, an unanswerable case of martyrdom was built by the volunteers ; an equally unanswerable case for promotion and a birthday honour was being hatched in the Inspector’s busy brain.

Brocklehurst was in high feather. "'Thank Heaven," he told Rafi. "I was forewarned. Or else, the Chitragunta pests would have descended on us in force."

Rafi was contradictory to the last. "Nothing of the kind would have happened."

"How dogmatic you are, Rafi! Something *has* happened. And Jalpeswara hasn't been the innocent lamb you supposed him to be."

"Jalpeswara is but human. It was a Heaven-sent opportunity and he took it."

"What was?" asked Brocklehurst, wondering.

"Our abortive arrangements. He inspired Rama Naicken's wire and reckoned on our going to Ramdrug. Things turned out even better than he anticipated. We withdrew the Reserve party at Parvati Point and the coast was clear. It seems to have been a sudden inspiration; he collected a handful of his men, went to Parvati Point and staged his little show."

So the controversy began. Brocklehurst was a diehard and Rafii was no better. Brocklehurst made a report to Government in sonorous officialese, referred to his own forethought and the utter lack of initiative on the part of the Police. Rafi, in language, the extreme of tactlessness, maintained the contrary. Last time I passed through Poppali, I heard Government was looking into the matter. Probably, they still are.

It is an ill wind which blows nobody good. Poppali retrieved her reputation; the movement took root and flourished for quite a long while. Jalpeswara got an advertisement which was what he wanted. People account for all this variously but Jalpeswara gives the entire credit to "B. B. Brocklehurst Esquire." That is Jalpeswara's view.

HYDE PARK CORNER

IT was Jubilee eve. London, usually so staid and sober, was given over to revelry. The streets were splashed with colour. Men and women in faultless evening dress trooped gaily along to see Celia Johnson in 'The Wind and the Rain' or George Robey mock the conventions by his own interpretation of Falstaff. All along the Embankment, round about Westminster, down the Mall, up to Hyde Park Corner, there was a continuous stream of gay, chattering crowds who seemed to have no care on earth. If poverty, hunger and want existed in London, for once they were hiding their heads in shame.

Bhadri Nath stepped out of Veeraswami's, walked to the top of Swallow Street and turned into Piccadilly. He stood for a moment, contemplating the sea of happy human faces which surged forward unceasingly. Quite a number of Indians passed along, unnoticed, unnoticing. They seemed as much a part of this stream of Londoners as though they had been born within the sound of Bow Bells. But there was not one face which he knew; once, for a brief moment, he caught sight of Joshi, a fellow-student, walking along with a bright-looking girl. He beckoned to him but Joshi was too much engrossed in his companion to take notice. "Lucky devil", said Bhadri Nath to himself and walked on. He was on his way to the Palladium where they were showing "Glamorous Nights"; he turned to the left but when he came to Swan and Edgar's there was a traffic jam and he was held up for a minute or two. Then as the green lights showed there was a rush forward and he followed in the wake of a group of young men and women who went singing in a north-country accent, "Stick a geranium in your hat at show you are happy". At the Eros statue a flower-girl came forward holding a sprig of geranium in her hand. "Sixpence, please," she said with a half-persuasive, half-pleading smile. Sixpence seemed to Bhadri a lot to pay for a symbol of happiness but the mood was on him now and he bought the geranium and stuck it in his hat. He hurried on but when he reached the theatre he found the doors barricaded; all the seats had been taken up. Some cheery soul in the dissolving queue said, "Come along, the night is more glamorous outside." It was true and Bhadri decided to follow the drama of the streets. The night was truly glamorous with coloured lights overhead and the sound of music and dancing from the restaurants. Sandeman's, Schweppe's and Guinness, like gaily-bedecked nautch girl, beckoned to the revellers to chase away thirst with their sparkling foam. It was a warm night and Bhadri took the chromatically brilliant hint; he walked into a Lyons' Corner House, had a coffee and ice and, coming out, stuck a cigarette into his mouth and joined the throng which led in the direction of Regent Street. Life, going one better than the music-hall song, had begun beyond Oxford Circus and Bhadri followed the tide which flowed at full flood in the Park.

In spite of the fact that Bhadri had come to London the previous winter he was new to the city. He had come over to be called to the English Bar. He was already an advocate at Poppali and had done uncommonly well in South India. But Bhadri was ambitious; he thirsted for professional eminence, a place among the elect and a barrister's bands seemed to be indicated. Not that he did not meet with opposition; barristers, he was told, cut but little ice in India, the B. L.'s were the better lawyers. Bhadri evolved what he thought was a smart epigram in answer. "A good

B. L. makes a better barrister." So he banked a couple of hundred pounds, outfaced the paternal injunction, kissed away his wife's tears, took leave of his children with wet eyelashes and set sail for England. He arrved in London in a fog, encountered difficulties in finding accommodation as a result of indifferent arrangements and finally cast anchor at a third-rate boarding-house in Belsize Park. He had intended to remove at the earliest opportunity but the place grew on him; Mrs. Simms was a kindly soul and gave him a passable version of '*sambhar*'; she assured him that her lodgers had mostly been Indian students and that they generally passed their examinations. Bhadri thought he could go further and fare worse, and so stayed on. After a preliminary week of sight-seeing with a Cook's tourist-party, he settled down to work and hardly stirred out during the winter. Of course, he went to the Inns of Court and learnt all about London that could be learned in the course of daily rides in the Tube to the Temple and back. April came and with it the Easter examinations; he then had a pretty stiff attack of the 'flu which kept him confined to his bed longer than he had anticipated. This was his first night out for what seemed to him ages and he decided to make the most of it.

The Park was teeming with folk. Gay crowds, giggling girls everywhere. The orators, as usual, held sway. There were at least half-a-dozen meetings in progress. One, held under the auspices of the Defence of India League, as a placard announced, attracted Bhadri's attention. From the middle step of a ladder, a bald-headed, portly individual in spectacles was denouncing the India Bill. "Sam Hoare is bartering away our birthright and Ramsay MacDonald is in the blooming conspiracy. Men like Winston Churchill who know what is what are voices in the wilderness." He elaborated his theme; cursed the Bill by bell, book and candle. One of his juicier points was that India was immoral to the core, was riddled with dancing girls.

"How jolly!" cried somebody in the crowd cheerfully.

"It may be jolly to nasty-minded folk but not to decent Englishmen," said the orator, looking as though he would like to bite a piece out of his interruptor.

"What's it you object to, the dancin, or the gals?" asked a man in a shovel hat.

A bow-legged, down-at-heels, Irishman whom the crowd hailed as Paddy, shambled forward. "Oh! he loves dancin, he do! So slim, so 'ansom, 'tis lovely to see 'im do the fox-trot!" And the crowd cheered.

"No, it's the gals I 'ave 'eard 'e objects to?" said the man in the shovel hat.

"And the gals dyin' for 'im! He won't look at 'em, the crool man!" cried a pretty-eyed, slatternly girl.

The orator tried to look unconcerned, while the crowd roared with laughter. He went on with his discourse; "And they want to give Parliamentary institutions to a country like that—a country where dancing-girls scuttle about like rabbits in a warren."

"What do they do?" asked a thin man in a reedy voice.

"What do they do? I suppose they parade the streets and pester you with their attentions," the orator said, airily.

Bhadri felt his gorge rising within him. This was his first visit to the Park and he wasn't used to Hyde Park oratory. He flung a question at the orator:

"Have you been to India?"

The orator looked Bhadri up and down as though sizing him up, when the man in the shovel hat interrupted.

"Come alon' noo. Answer the gen'lm'n. "Ave you been out East?"

The orator turned to deal with the shovel hat. He was going to devastate him. He asked in deliberate tones, "Have—you—seen—God?"

"No more than ye 'ave," said the man in the shovel hat.

"And yet you believe in him, don't you?"

"I don't", was the unabashed reply.

The orator threw up his hands, twitched his lips as much as to say he had no use for that kind of man. The crowd continued to rag him, and their geniality and good-humour had their effect on Bhadri. He asked ponderoulsy,

"You spoke of solicting and things like that. Do you know what goes on in the streets of Paris?" He had a sudden vision of Montmartre where he had spent a hectic night on his way out. "do you know what goes on here, further up?" asked Paddy, pointing in a westerly direction.

"You mean in Ireland?" asked the orator, preparing to be nasty.

"What do you know of Oireland, you guttersnipe? I mean, 'ere in the Park which you 'aunt."

The orator now lost his temper. He grew red in the face and asked his heckler, "Want to go to the cells?"

"I can't till you come down and take a black eye," said Paddy, cheerfully.

"Take care," warned the orator, "if you don't behave I will call a cop and give you in charge."

"Ah! listen to Lord Trenchard, givin' orders!" said Paddy, amiably. The crowd was delighted. The orator realised he wasn't succeeding and in a few minutes came down from his perch. And Bhadri left.

When he had gone some distance, he heard a voice whisper close to him, "Hullo, Johnny!"

Bhadri turned round and saw a young woman in a black overall, smiling at him in a familiar way.

"Yes?" he grunted.

"You shut him up nicely. didn't you?" she said ingratiatingly.

"Whom?"

"That bloke on the soap-box there."

"Oh, did I? I suppose I did," said Bhadri with a pleased feeling and walked on. He was at a loss what to say to the woman who kept by his side, when she asked,

"Like a girl?"

Bhadri was taken aback but he recovered himself in a second. "A dancing one?" he asked with an abandoned air.

"Ah! you are a wag," she said archly.

Bhadri did not disclaim the honour. She sidled closer to him and asked, "Have a good time?"

"How much is a good time?" asked Bhadri, his curiosity now aroused. Shyly and with a sense of furtive embarrassment, he found himself settling the terms of his adventure. He then led his companion to one of the seats and then, thinking better of it, got up and walked on. "I prefer walking," he told her, in explanation.

The woman, familiar with the ritual, slipped her arm into his and suggested strolling across the grass.

"That's prohibited, isn't it?" asked Bhadri, gaily.

"Not to-night, at any rate. King's orders."

But Bhadri kept to the gravelled path. He asked his companion her name.

"Betty," she said.

"Betty what?"

"What does it matter? Betty will do, won't it?"

"Well, if it will, let it." They walked on in silence.

"Where do you belong?" pursued Bhadri. Betty couldn't repress a smile. "Up north," she said vaguely.

"South of the north and north of the south, I suppose. You are a cautious creature," was Bhadri's amused comment.

They had come into a patch of light near the Cavalry Memorial. Bhadri had got over his initial nervousness and was falling into line when he was surprised to hear a refined voice saying in Tamil, "*Molla po.*" Bhadri turned round and saw a dark-haired child running along. An elderly lady in a gorgeous purple and gold *sari* was trying to catch up with the child. He wondered who she could be; there were Indians staying at the Dorchester, he had heard. Meanwhile, a turbanned gentleman came along, the husband of the lady. Where compatriots away from home are concerned, the social code slides into the background; and Bhadri introduced himself. The newcomer mentioned a name well-known in South India and it transpired he knew Bhadri's people. The runaway child came to look on the stranger and Bhadri, who was reminded of his own children at home, patted the boy on his head, but the boy edged away shyly. Bhadri's thoughts flew homeward and it was the turbanned gentleman who brought them back to earth.

"I am afraid we are keeping your friend waiting." he said, pointing to Betty, who stood at a discreet distance.

"That's all right thanks. A fellow-student," replied Bhadri, casually, as he supposed.

The interlude had brought Bhadri's home in Poppali vividly back to his mind. He had an attractive family which included two boys and a girl who was his special favourite. He wished he could whistle a *jinn* out of Araby and have his family brought to his side on a magic carpet.

"A penny for your thoughts," murmured Betty at his side.

"I haven't one with me," said Bhadri. The spell was broken.

"I say, Betty, where] are we [going ?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know. You go and I follow." This in a sub-acid tone. Bhadri noticed her lack of enthusiasm and remarked, "How mechanical !

Betty didn't answer. This wasn't the *mamul.* He thought her man queer.

They came near a pool of light thrown by one of the electric lamps near Hamilton Place and Bhadri looking at her, said truthfully.

"I say, Betty, you are damn pretty!"

"Nice of you to say it," she said, listlessly.

"Really and truly, you are very pretty, one of the prettiest girls I have seen in London."

"You seem to have had a lot of experience," She said, with an amused air.

"Not in the sense you mean," Bhadri corrected hastily. "I see lots of girls but you are fine."

Betty revived a bit. "I amn't the woman I was. I used to be pretty once, leastways, the men used to say so. Girls grow more beautiful as they grow up, don't they?"

"A matter of rouge and lipstick, isn't that so?" asked Bhadri.

"I don't go in much for that sort of thing. For one thing I can't afford it."

Bhadri noticed the total lack of paint on her lips. He said:

"Dash it all, woman, you must be doing pretty well in your line?" The moment he had said it, he felt it was a mean thing to say and he felt a cad. And Betty appeared hurt, or, was she miserable? Bhadri couldn't say.

"You may think what you like," she said, tiredly.

Bhadri's heart smote him. He asked impulsively. "I am sorry, Betty, I didn't mean it. But do you like this sort of thing?

She looked questioningly.

"I mean, taking up with odd men in the Park," said Bhadri, and immediately felt sorry and stupid. But Betty was struck by the earnestness in his face and said simply:

"I don't. I don't like it at all. I hate it, oh, how I hate it!" Bhadri could hear her swallowing a lump.

"Then why go on with it?" he pursued.

She was a bit annoyed now, but there was something in Bhadri's face which reconciled her to the inquisition. "I must live, mustn't I?" she asked.

"Haven't you a job?"

"I have one but it isn't half enough. There are kids at home."

"How many?"

"A boy and a girl."

"Where is your husband?"

"Dead."

She said she had come down in the world and had at the moment a job which fetched her ten shillings a week. "That should do," said Bhadri delivering judgment. He did not know London. And Betty explained.

"So this is a side-line. How much do you make out of it?"

"An occasional dollar."

"Dollar?"

"Yes, about a dollar a month," said Betty.

"You said you came from up north and you talk of dollars. Are you an American ?"

Betty kept her rising temper. She said, "But for your colour I should have thought you were a cop in private clothes."

"All the same, are you English, Scotch or American ?"

Betty now lost her temper. She screamed at him. "What the devil does it matter to you ?"

"I am only interested. Don't answer me if you would rather not," said Bhadri, unperturbed.

She threw herself on a bench and broke into tears. Bhadri was distressed. He went up to her, stroked her and said pleadingly, "I say, Betty, don't take it so. I only meant to be kind.

She pushed him away from her with an angry movement. "I hate you. Why don't you get your money's worth and let me go ?" She sobbed into her handkerchief.

"I don't want my money's worth," said Bhadri, in a level voice.

She looked at him like a startled fawn. "What do you mean ?" she asked.

"I mean what I say. I am glad to have been with you. I am sorry you are down in your luck." He was feeling uplifted now, the adventure was ceasing to be sordid, he saw in front of him only an unfortunate mother who could not make ends meet.

Betty was mollified, faintly surprised. Who was this Indian who talked to her as nobody had talked before ? He was different from the rest. They all took her for granted, herself and her wickedness. They paid for their pleasure, and then cast her aside like a crumpled flower.

She took Bhadri's arm now and, in a voice of contrition, said, "I am sorry. I was a beast."

"No, you aren't. We men are beasts to take advantage of you."

"Men aren't so bad, you know. We women are worse. She-devils."

Bhadri changed the conversation. He was in no mood for melodrama.

"How old are your kids?" he asked. They had been on his brain ever since she told him of them.

"Andrew is seven and Sita three."

"Sita!"

"I don't mind telling you my husband was from your country," she said, watching the effect.

"What was his name?"

"You must excuse me."

"Sorry. What happened to him?"

"Killed in a railway smash."

"What was he?"

"A doctor's assistant."

"And you?"

"His wife," she said, smiling at her evasiveness.

"I say, before that?"

"See, there you are at it again!" she said, with a reproving smile.

"Sorry again. And he left you nothing ?"

"No. He left the house rent and the washing-bills.

"How bad of him ! " he said, banally.

She rose in defence of her man. "Not a bit. He was fine, you know. A big, upstanding man, a husband in a million."

Bhadri was struck by her loyalty. "You are wonderful, Betty."

"Not at all. The rest of them at Prentice Court envied me my man."

"Isn't it a pity you should go on like this ? Why not marry again ?"

"The fairy prince hasn't appeared yet. Unless you offer yourself." She was growing light again.

Bhadri also shed his seriousness. "There is a difficulty. I am married myself and have a wife and children."

"How nice ! And they are in India, I suppose ?"

"Yes, And do you know what my baby-girl is called ?"

"No," she said, pleasantly interested.

"Guess," said Bhadri. "I can't ?" replied Betty.

"Sita."

"Oh ! isn't that fine ? How old is she ? "

And he was telling her all about Sita, her size, the colour of her hair, the dimple in her cheeks. Betty's Sita had a dimple in her cheek, too. They talked of their little ways, their preferences and naughtinesses. Hyde Park became a fairyland where pink babies, brown babies, dark-haired and golden-haired babies romped about and played. Betty and Bhadri ceased to be their own pitiful, sin-steeped, little selves and became bubbling fountains of parental love. They spoke of their children, the one of the children for whom she sinned, the other of the ones by remembering whom he was saved. Betty forgot her cares, Bhadri, his vague quest for adventure, and baby talk held them till they suddenly found themselves in the glare and blare of Hyde Park Corner. The great, big buses bound for Victoria, Kensington and Park Lane wheeled and charged about them.

"And we part here, do we?" asked Bhadri.

"I suppose so. And if I have any sense of decency, I must give you back your money," said Betty.

"Not a bit. Where are you going now? Not to the Park, I suppose?" Bhadri hated himself for the unintended sneer.

Betty was quite calm now. "Not to-night, at any rate. I am not wickeder than I need be. When I meet a good man, I try to be good for a day at least."

Bhadri was not sure she was not laughing at him. He apologised and asked her if she would go with him to the pictures.

"No, Sita is in bed with a fever and I must go back to her. Thank you all the same," said Betty.

He asked for details and learned that Sita lacked nursing comforts. He drew some silver from his pocket and thrust it into her hand. "Here is your bus fare and something with which to buy a present for Sita.

Good-bye, Betty, and thank you for a very nice evening, indeed." And before Betty could collect herself and answer, he had mingled with the crowd and was lost to sight.

When Betty recovered from her surprise, she looked round and at the money in her hand. She could scarcely believe her eyes. Who was this stranger who spoke like a *padre* and where had he gone? He had taken pity on her, that was it, pity! With a sudden movement, she flung the silver on to the pavement and was gathering her skirt to run when a kind-faced lady touched her on the shoulder and said:

"You have dropped something."

Betty started and said shamefully, "Thank you so much. How stupid of me!" The lady helped her to pick up the silver. She said pleasantly, "What is your young man doing that he is not here to look after you?"

Betty came as near to blushing as she had done for many a long day. She placed the money in her bag more or less mechanically and made for a 73 bus which drew up beside the kerb on its way to Kensington.

TWO OF A KIND

HAVE you heard of 77 of the Police? If you haven't you do not know Mailam. You may know the V. M. or you may not; of the Mirasdar himself you may have but the vaguest notion; you may not be familiar with the *pujari* of the temple, the tank watchman and other village celebrities. But if you do not know 77, I will swear that you have not been within miles of Mailam.

77 is the officer in charge of the Mailam outpost. His name is Mangapati Raju; but for all the purpose which it served it may have been Macgillivray or Madgaonkar He was known to the country round, to the Police of the district and to everybody else, simply as 77. Mailam worshipped him. He was fat and frivolous. sleek and comfortable. His wife, a dutiful creature, fed him on *kurma* and *kidgeree* every day. How did she do it? His pay was only thirty rupees a month. How did she do it? I do not know and do not care. It does not concern either you or me.

77 had been at Mailam for more years than I care to remember. Once a D. S. P., who was inspecting the circle, essayed his transfer. It was Chari, famous for his strictness; he visited the outpost and was received by the unsuspecting 77 under a canopy of jasmine flowers. The outpost was a ramshackle affair, all white-wash-and-tile; but it was now changed out of all recognition. Long festoons of jasmine curved in graceful sweeps from the centre of the ceiling and fell in ample folds down the sides. It was a place for blushing brides and did not go with bayonets, duty rosters and condemned scabbards. But it was not the artistic incongruity of it all which struck Chari; it

was the light which it threw on 77's financial position which struck him forcibly.

"The outpost officer seems to be doing very well, indeed," he said looking up and down and around.

"Yes, sir," replied the Inspector, tentatively.

"How does he do it?" asked Chari.

The Inspector hummed and hawed but did not get near an intelligible answer.

Chari went back to Kedaram and the first thing which he did was to send 77 an order transferring him to the other end of the district. "The good people of Mailam must be damn glad to be rid of him. He has been sponging on them," he told his Deputy.

"I am not sure. He is very popular there," said the Deputy.

When the order reached 77, he communicated the fact to the villagers of Mailam and began to pack his household gods. The villagers thought awhile, then proceeded in a body to Kedaram and waited in deputation on the D. S. P. They pleaded for the retention of 77 at Mailam. Transfer him and the heavens would come crashing overhead. If the order were not cancelled they would have to leave Mailam themselves.

Apparently they had left home in a lucky hour, for they caught the D. S. P. in a helpful mood of vexation. There had been a *lathi* charge and the D. S. P. got no thanks for it. The district cried out for his blood; authority at headquarters was not at all sure the charge had been effective; the hospital admissions showed too few broken limbs.

"It's something there is at least one policeman of whom people are willing to say a good word," Chari told himself. He cancelled the order there and then, and the villagers returned home in triumph. And 77 stayed on at Mailam and everyone was pleased.

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BUt not Kora Thangan. He hated 77. Not unreasonably. For 77 spent the best part of the best days of the year trying to land him. And to Thangan's credit it must be said that he was most difficult fish to land. He was as full of tricks as a monkey. Not a mere monkey but a monkey with a dash of the devil. We have heard of *koravas* who would cut a woman's ear-lobes because they happened to be in the way of *olais* and *thodus*, but they always left them behind. Not so, Thangan; he invariably carried them away for a keepsake. I have myself seen one of those gruesome exhibits in court. He would go to the *shandy*, mix with a party of cattle-buyers, help to fix the price and walk away with the price before his friends realised what was happening. Once he tried to seduce his brother's daughter and when the shivering thing refused, he burnt bits of her into black blotches with nitric acid. He was a thorn on 77's side and the spoiler of his reputation and an unmitigated nuisance to the people around.

When the news of 77's transfer came, Thangan danced for joy; when it was cancelled, he bit his lips in vexation. "Who did it?" he asked Velan, a novice at the trade, who always brought him news of the enemy.

"The Mirasdar," said Velan, "He went to the D. S. P. and spoke to him."

The Mirasdar was one of Thangan's professed enemies. "Time that the pot-bellied blighter was taught a lesson," growled Thangan.

When the deputation returned home, they gave a feast in honour of the occasion. They whole countryside gave itself a holiday and was there to celebrate. Now, there were two things which the Mirasdar loved, - his local position and his little daughter. Valli, a pretty-eyed girl, had pestered her father for a deer-calf and the Mirasdar had given her one, at some trouble and expense, for deer were scarce in the district. He had to get one from the forest of Mel-Poppali over the border. Valli doted on the deer. It was a common saying in the neighbourhood that the village doted on the Mirasdar, the Mirasdar on his daughter and little Valli on the deer. At the conclusion of the dinner, Valli came out to feed her pet. She had both her hands full of *jangiri* and *jilebi*. But the deer wasn't there. She searched for it high and low but it could not be found. She ran to her father with tears in her eyes. The Mirasdar was sitting in the centre of an admiring circle, luxuriously chewing tobacco and betel. He was retailing — for the hundredth time — his interview with the D. S. P. He set Valli on his knee, told her the deer must have strayed, sent out his farm-servants to look for it and proceeded with his narration.

The search party returned after an hour and reported that there were no signs of the deer. Valli set up a squeal of agony. " Somebody has stolen it, " she wailed. " Stolen it ! My dear child, what are you talking ! Who would dream of stealing from my premises and that in broad daylight ?" said the Mirasdar.

" Not unless Kora Thangan has done it, " said one of the revellers.

Kora Thangan ! Yes, it was quite possible. But would he dare ? No, he wouldn't, they decided.

" I do not agree, " said 77, spitting out a quantity of betel juice. " Has anybody seen him hereabouts ?" he asked.

INFORMATION came soon and quick. Rangia Tevar's son had seen him that morning. Sent for and questioned, he said that he had met Thangan by the stream, fishing-rod in hand. He was going to land a bigger fish that morning than he had done for many a long day, he had told the boy.

And others had seen him too. Barigiri Naidu, Meikol, Mari, Komali Kuppan.

77 had no more doubts. He saw Kora Thangan's hand in the business as clearly as though he had been present at the purloining. The Mirasdar tugged at his ferocious-looking moustache and said he would have Kora Thangan's skin peeled off his body. He would, if his name was Mangattu Mahanam Masilla Mani Tevar. 77 did not waste his time over heroics. He sent his men in different directions saying, " Bring him to me before this evening, dead or alive. "

And they did bring him, mercifully alive. And with the stolen deer. The Mirasdar did not actually flay him ; 77 would not allow that. But the battered and bruised Thangan whom 77 produced before the Sub-divisional Magistrate at Kedaram the next day, bore no recognisable resemblance to the taut-limbed *korava* who played havoc with the cattle of the countryside.

Kora Thangan engaged a vakil and asked for bail. 77 strongly opposed the motion and averred that, if Thangan were released on bail, there would be an end of the case. The vakil said the case was a piece of pure concoction, the result of enmity and talked learnedly of presumptions of innocence and other legal matters. The Magistrate granted bail. " A recruit magistrate, " was 77's not altogether inaudible comment.

Would His Honour direct that the deer be handed over to the accused ? He would produce it at the time of hearing, said the vakil. It belonged to Kora Thangan and he was entitled to keep it until it was shown it belonged to somebody else. He cited cases and the Magistrate was impressed.

77 lost as much of his temper as he dared. Did His Honour think that, to his many occupations, Thangan added deer cultivation ? If the deer should be handed over to him, they would have seen the last of it and the case would be ruined for lack of evidence of identification of the stolen property. With great difficulty, he persuaded the Magistrate to let the complainant-Mirasdar keep it, pending trial.

It was some weeks before the case came up for trial. And when it did, Thangan reported sick and asked for an adjournment. It was put aff again on the same ground.

* * * * *

IT was the morning before the day finally fixed for the trial, 77 was in his hut in the lines, having his *chota* of fat rice-cakes and a goblet of coffee. The Mirasdar turned up, gesticulating wildly, "Kora Thangan has been at it again. He has walked off with the deer, soon after midnight. And the case coming off to-morrow !" he stuttered.

77 was temperamentally *blase* but, when he heard the news, he was staggered. The piece of rice-cake which he was raising to his mouth did not reach its destination. Holding it between his fingers, he asked for details and the Mirasdar gave them. Thangan's very footprints had been traced.

“Arrest him at once, please, and lock him up. And for heaven’s sake, see he does not get bail again,” implored the Mirasdar.

“That will not help you to get your deer-calf,” said 77, with an air of abstraction. The Mirasdar was chilled by 77’s lack of enthusiasm.

77 was doing some intense thinking. “I don’t think I will record your information. Let us go and hear what Thangan has to say first,” he said.

“Oh, but he is sure to have killed the creature by now,” said the Mirasdar.

“And scattered the stuff to the winds,” completed 77.

They were right. The Mirasdar and 77 went to Kakapatti, where Thangan lived. At sight of 77, Thangan got up and ambled towards him, his palms folded in half-hearted greeting. “What have you done with the deer-calf, Thangan?” asked 77.

Thangan glowered round him and said, coolly, “Part of it is cooking inside there,” pointing to the hut. “The rest is travelling down stream.

“Very well, Thangan. You have done it very cleverly this time,” said 77 and returned to the station.

“You must run him in now. He has confessed his guilt to you,” said the Mirasdar.

“The Police are dirt in the eyes of the law, Mirasdar. A confession made to them is not evidence. That is the law,” explained 77 acidly.

“Make a case of it, somehow. We will see the case does not suffer for lack of evidence,” insisted the Mirasdar.

"No. This case shan't be registered. Thangan won't go to jail for this," said 77 with decision.

"But......"

"There is no 'but' to it. Leave me to deal with this," said 77, finally.

Hurt, mystified, and a prey to conflicting emotions, the Mirasdar went home. He did not recover his equanimity till 77 met him again that evening and had a long talk with him.

77 went to the court the next day and asked for an adjournment. The leading witnesses were ill and couldn't be present. Thangan's vakil opposed it vigorously and the Magistrate was not inclined to grant an adjournment. But 77 knew his magistrate. He just waited. And the case was put off to a day a fortnight later. "No more adjournments on any ground," said the Magistrate warningly, with as severe a face as he could summon.

* * * * *

IT was a blistering day in June when the case was taken up at last. 77 had his witnesses ready, a whole crowd of them. Thangan was there, sitting under the shade of a tamarind tree, waiting for the case to be called. He was chewing betel unconcernedly. He was certain they could not touch a hair of his head over this case. His lawyer stepped down from his car with the air of one who was sure of getting his client off before the day was over.

The case was called. 77 stuck a pair of spectacles on his nose and called his witnesses. The Mirasdar went into the box and was sworn. The vakil, a fussy youngster, interposed with, what he thought was a twinkle charged with meaning in his eye, "Has the *corpus delicti* come?"

The Magistrate himself translated it. "Has the deer been brought?" he asked 77. He was strangely cool in his manner. Did he know?

But he did not know 77. "Yes, your honour," was 77's answer, rapped out like a musket shot. And, calling one of his men, asked him to bring the deer into court and found fault with the Mirasdar for not bringing it in with him. He got busy with his case-diary again.

The Magistrate looked at the vakil and the vakil looked at Thangan who stood demurely in the dock. Meanwhile, in walked the Mirasdar's farm-servant, leading a well-grown deer which came caracoling. It was as much as the man could do to keep the frisky animal under control.

"That is not the deer," shouted Thangan from the dock. "That is not it," repeated his vakil after him and held a brief consultation with his client.

77, interrupted in his study of the case-diary, looked up. He did not appear to have heard what was going on and asked the court-clerk what the matter was. The vakil, after another whispered consultation with Thangan, was telling the court that the deer now produced was not the one which had been produced at the first hearing. Evidently they had substituted another animal in place of the first.

"Substituted! Why? Why on earth should we?" asked 77. His face wore a puzzled look.

The vakil was explaining. "Your honour will remember that the animal we saw the other day was a calf only so high. This is a full-grown deer."

77 saw light. He even allowed himself the luxury of a respectful laugh. The puzzle was now solved.

"The learned gentleman forgets that three months have elapsed since then." He good-humouredly forgave the vakil the imputation he had made. "It's a *bonafide* mistake on his part," he said, in an audible aside to the court-clerk.

The vakil was upset. He turned to Thangan and asked, "You said you had killed the deer?"

"I still say it, sir. 77 knows it and has brought another deer," said Thangan.

"And served you right, you blackguard," observed the vakil, disgustedly.

"There is something fishy about this, sir," he told the court, trying to look unconcerned. "We will find out as the case proceeds."

"Let us ask the witnesses about it," said the Magistrate sagely.

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THE Mirasdar was the first witness and spoke to his case. The cross-examination was directed to the question of the identity of the stolen deer. The vakil did his best but he was on unfamiliar ground in regard to deer. He had no idea about their ways, rate of growth, habitat. His questions were nothing more than assertions of substitution which were indignantly repudiated by the witness. They all went into the box, Barigiri Naidu, Meikole, Mari, Komali Kuppan. They knew the deer as well as they knew their own wives. 77 put into the box 'a respectable resident of Mel-Poppali,' who had sent the deer to the Mirasdar. He was learned in the lore of the forest and explained the points in the animal which had made him select it as a suitable present to the Mirasdar's a daughter.

And that was the end of it. The case ran its course. Thangan produced a few witnesses in his defence. "To prove an *alibi*. Thangan was at Kakapatti at the time of the alleged occurrence," explained the vakil.

However, what they proved was an *alibi from* Kakapatti. 77 cross-examined them and they dutifully told him that, on the day of the occurrence Thangan had been to Mailam and returned to Kakapatti only in the evening.

The Magistrate gave Thangan two years. He came out and went to jail again for seven years. He has done five.

The Magistrate asked 77 privately if it was true that the deer had been stolen a second time and killed before the date of hearing. 77 winked a wicked wink, put his hand respectfully before his mouth and said, "What is there the master does not know? We must give no quarter to these blackguards." And the Magistrate understood.

Was 77 right? As they say in the Legislative Council, the question does not arise. But, can you deny that 77 is popular in the district and deservedly so?

THE ORACLE OF THE NIM TREE

UNDER a spreading *nim* tree, in a clearing at the edge of the wood, stood in state, the all-powerful Aiyanar of the Anjur forest, with a score of clay horses ceremoniously mounting guard in front. Short and squat, with eyes glaring, a ferocious-looking moustache painted in black, and a loin-cloth, greasy with drippings of oil—the gifts of the faithful—he maintained an unceasing watch over the countryside and its affairs. His responsibilities, indeed, were great. In return for their devotion, he had to keep the villagers from harm, their cattle from the rinderpest and the murrain, to see that the seasonal rains came seasonably and that the crops did not fail.

In front of the shrine, a thick-set, very cocksure-looking person ambled about fussily. He was the hereditary priest of the Aiyanar and his forehead and chest were liberally besmeared with sacred ash, which gleamed in the sunlight. It was plain that he was the deity's familiar and the authentic communicant of the divine will.

Near by, her palms reverently folded across her breast and a look of subdued eagerness on her face, stood Mother Ayilandam, with her twenty-four year old son, Ponnan, standing sheepishly by her side.

The priest squatted cross-legged in front of the deity and intoned verses of invocation under his breath. Then the divine affiatus came on him; he was seized with a violent fit of shaking and he seemed to control himself with an effort. Then, beckoning Ayilandam to approach, he blew a handful of sacred ash in her face and shouted convulsively. Mother Ayilandam, quivering with expectancy, asked.

"What is the deity's pleasure?"

"Go ahead," replied the *poosari*. "Settle the marriage. Bring you luck."

"Could you tell which is the girl the deity prefers?" asked Ayilandam.

"The girl you have in mind. The dark-eyed, curly-haired, tender-breasted wench your son affects," replied the *poosari*, still quivering all over.

"What about the kinsman who is crossing our path ?" she asked, doubtfully.

"Don't mind him. The Lord will hoof him out."

"So I may go and fix it up, may I ?"

"You may. And don't forget to give a fully-grown goat to the Ayyanar when the wedding is over," the *poosari* reminded the woman.

"That I certainly will not," dutifully promised Ayilandam. "I do promise, here and now, that I shall give him the best goat of the flock."

Mother Ayilandam and her son went home in high glee. At the hut waited Ayyavu, eager to know the Aiyanar's will.

"It's all right," said Ayilandam, as she came in. "Pappal is the deity's choice. Let's go ahead with it."

Ayyavu did not seem too pleased. His own preference was for Nalli, who was an only daughter and had a nice dowry. Like Tennyson's Northern Farmer he thought that "a girl with money was as good to cuddle an' kiss as one who 'ad'nt nought." However, Ponnan thought differently. He was smitten with Pappal, who dimpled deliciously and clinked her glass bangles in such a way that it went to his head like the juice of the toddy-palm (which, between you and me, he drank only very occasionally and that on the sly).

The old man gave a moodily acquiescent nod. He knew the odds were against him. In his secret heart, there was a numbing fear of cousin Kalimuthu, who could make himself disagreeable if he chose, and he did seem to choose. Ayilandam guessed his unspoken fear and proceeded to reassure him.

"What *can* that blighter do ?" she asked.

"He can blight," said Ayyavu, simply.

"Let him, if he dare. The Ayyanar will gouge his eyes out," confidently asserted Ayilandam.

"So you say."

"Don't be distrustful. Has the Aiyanar ever let us down?" she asked, challengingly.

Ayyavu dropped further argument. Long experience had taught him that it was never any good setting up against his wife or the Aiyanar.

Ayilandam set out for Pappal's house with betel and nut, plantain-fruits and turmeric, to make a formal offer of marriage. And as she stepped forth, a couple of quails, with outspread wings, sailed past her on the left. Delighted, she turned to look, but Ayyavu, himself on the look out for signs, motioned to her to proceed while the wind was favourable.

"The omens, indeed, are very good," he confessed to his son.

"The *poosari* was quite positive, father," assented Ponnan.

The old man's doubts returned. "But, Kalimuthu"-

"Oh, Kalimuthu be hanged!" broke in Ponnan, superiorly.

"He is'nt easy to hang, son" said Ayyavu. "He is hand-in-glove with Rangan Servai and that is not a good sign,"

"Surely Rangan Servai will not turn against us after all these years?"

"I hope he will not", said Ayyavu, musing.

Ponnan was an only son and lived with his parents in the family homestead. They had a *cawnie* of arable land, a patch of garden, a few fruit-bearing tamarind trees and a hut thatched over with palmyra leaves. The family holding would ordinarily have sufficed for their needs but Ayyavu was in debt. He owed Rangan Servai, the local moneylender, a hundred and fifty rupees; it had been outstanding for over ten years, the interest alone—sixteen per-cent—having been paid regularly. Ayyavu could not sleep for thinking of it. He had saved up a little bit but that was needed for Ponnan's wedding. It was time that the lad was wed, he was twenty-four and they could do with an extra hand at the farm. It was about this time that cousin Kalimuthu turned up. A thoroughly bad hat. He bore a grudge against Ponnan, who regularly beat him in the village *rekla* races and in playing with the sword-stick, which Kalimuthu could scarcely hold in his hand. On the strength of a two-year stay at Magwe, in Northern Burma, as an odd jobs man in a Chettiar firm, he fancied himself a cut above the rest of the village. When he returned home he looked out for a wife and fixed on Nalli, a buxom lass, more than whose buxomness, her rather tidy dowry influenced his decision. But when he heard the name of Pappal coupled with that of Ponnan in village gossip, he switched over, partly to spite Ponnan and partly because he felt that what Ponnan sought must be worth the seeking. He was, however, reckoning without the host. Pappal made no secret of her preference for Ponnan who, though not the heftier, was certainly the nicer-looking of the two. Kalimuthu had a cross eye which became crosser under the influence of excitement, and particularly whenever he happened to scowl, which was pretty often, and on those occasions Pappal could scarce repress her fast-coming giggles.

Kalimuthu sent a formal offer of marriage through his maternal uncle. Kalimuthu, it must be remembered, had made a bit of money and, I am sorry to say, for one disloyal moment, Pappal's parents were tempted. However, Pappal would'nt hear of it and she had been so accustomed to having her way that she politely declined his offer. This was a stinging slap in the face for Kalimuthu, who swore he would wreck the proposal to wed her to Ponnan.

He spoke to his uncle, who tried to dissuade him. "You cannot succeed, nephew. The Aiyanar is on his side," he said.

Kalimuthu tossed an angry head. "What can the Aiyanar do? A four-anna piece will bring him over to my side."

Rather inconsistent that, seeing that a purchasable Aiyanar was *ex hypothesi*, a powerful one, but Kalimuthu was far too much in a temper to see the flaw in his logic.

"Then why not plank down four annas and win the Ayyanar over?" suggested the uncle.

"I know a trick worth two of that," snorted Kalimuthu and strode off in the direction of Rangan Servai's house. The moneylender was at home casting up his accounts and chewing betel with a quid of tobacco.

"Kalimuthu did not beat about the bush. "I want you to demand your dues from Ayyavu. He is crossing my path," he told Rangan Servai.

"I have heard," replied Rangan Servai. "But my demanding my money won't do any good. He has'nt a *pice*."

"That's why I am asking you to make the demand. You can sue him then," said Kalimuthu.

"I may get a decree in that case, but that won't help me to see the colour of my money," countered Rangan Servai.

"But you can have his property sold through court," said Kalimuthu.

Rangan Servai begged to be excused. He did not fancy himself in the role of a home-wrecker. Kalimuthu was very annoyed. "If you are so squeamis has all that, transfer the note to me and I shall take proceedings," he said.

Rangan Servai did some quick thinking. "Your terms?" he asked.

"How much is due to you?"

"A hundred and fifty rupees. Ayyavu has paid all the interest," replied Rangan Servai.

"What will you remit if I pay you in cash?" asked Kalimuthu.

"No remission, please. Pay a hundred and fifty and take the note."

They haggled for a bit and finally Rangan Servai took off twenty-five rupees and endorsed Ayyavu's note of hand in favour of Kalimuthu, *without recourse*, as lawyers say. Rangan Servai was an old hand and knew his law; he was'nt going to let Kalimuthu get any hold over him. Kalimuthu went home, brought a hundred and twenty-five rupees and paid it to Rangan Servai, there and then. Rangan Servai smiled a wicked smile as he took the money.

Kalimuthu lost no time in sending a stiffly-worded demand to Ayyavu, calling upon him to pay his dues in two days, on pain of being sued in court.

That was a regular bolt from the blue. It dropped upon them right in the middle of a family council on the wedding arrangements. They were stunned. Even Ayilandam, ever rich in resource was completely bowled over. The *conji* of *ragi* in the mud-pot lay uneaten and that *sari* of figured chintz which Ponnan had brought 'on approval' would not be needed. No wedding now, it was more likely to be a funeral.

Ayyavu, a man of peace, suggested they had better give in. For one pathetic instant, Ayilandam seemed inclined the same way, but the sight of Ponnan, sitting at the doorway, a picture of silent misery, aroused her fighting instincts. The omens had been good. Could the Aiyanar have been playing a joke? That could never be. And those care-free quails, were they frauds? Not they. No, there was sure to be a way out. At worst, it might mean further borrowings and Ayilandam, whenever she was worked up, made light of borrowings. Ayyavu, cautious in misfortune, shook his head deprecatingly.

"Let's go and consult a lawyer in town," suggested Ayilandam. "We have been paying only in instalments all these years, in fact that was the understanding and how can this upstart be allowed to demand it all in a lump?" she argued.

The lawyer turned up trumps. He heard the whole story and, being a man of large family himself, his heart went out to the aged pair. He assured them the Aiyanar was right. Under the law, nothing was due to Kalimuthu. He would send him a reply in that sense. They could go home and get along with the wedding arrangements.

The lawyer was as good as his word. He replied to Kalimuthu that Ayyavu had paid in all two hundred and forty rupees by way of interest alone. Legally only about seventy five could go towards interest; the balance, therefore had to be adjusted to towards the principal sum due and calculated in that way, the entire debt stood discharged. And if Kalimuthu persisted in going to court, he would have to pay his client's expenses.

When Kalimuthu got this reply he laughed till it looked as if his sides would split. A false defence, he could understand, but this was an absolutely imbecile one. He put on a *banian* and went straight to his lawyer and asked him to file an action on the promissory note.

The lawyer took down a sheet of note - paper and made a few calculations. He then handed the note to Kalimuthu and said he had no case.

" But, why, I have paid hard cash ? A hundred and twenty-five rupees in new currency notes, " said Kalimuthu, wondering.

"The more the pity," said the lawyer. "You cannot get larger rights than Rangan Servai. His debt has been discharged."

He explained it all to the mystified Kalimuthu. The Government had recently passed a law to relieve peasants who were in debt. They had fixed a scale of interest and six *per cent* was the maximum interest allowed. Anything paid in excess was credited towards the principal sum. Ayyavu had paid two hundred and forty rupees by way of interest, at sixteen per cent. He need have paid only seventy-five rupees, so much so, the excess, a hundred and sixty-five, more than covered the principal sum due from him. Nothing more remained to be paid.

Kalimuthu stood in speechless amaze. When he came to, he asked.

"What is this new law which you speak of ? "

"The Agriculturists' Relief Act, and it came into force a fortnight ago."

MOTIVES AND MEN

THERE are some people in this world who will never give a man credit for good intentions. Ko Hla Tin was one such. Never was a good deed done but he suspected a hidden motive behind it. He was always looking beneath the surface and peering round the corners of men's minds. He burrowed under and brought up mud and dirt. He was of the rabbit breed.

This feature of his character he showed when Maung San Lin built a pagoda in the little seaside village of Myohaung. Now, there are many reasons why a good Buddhist should build a *pya**. It may be to acquire merit or to atone for one's sins; it may even be a bid for divine aid in some important undertaking. In any case, it is an excellent spiritual exercise, calculated to speed a man along the eight-fold path to *Neikban* or *Nirvana*.

None of these reasons, however, applied to the case of San Lin. He wasn't thinking of his sins even if he was aware of them and he was by no means tired of life. He wanted to go on living and to be born again among the bowler-hatted and horn-rimmed youth of Burma. His own explanation that, in building the *pya*, he was only fulfilling a pious duty, carrying out what he could not help regarding as a mandate from his father, Ko Hla Tin received with frank disbelief.

"As if he respected his father's wishes while he was alive, to care for them when he is dead" he sneered.

"I tell you what his game is, he wants to marry that white girl now that the old man is gone. He knows the village will not approve. So he wants to buy you all up. And he knows that the surest way to do it is to build a *pya*." To the credit of Myohaung, it must be said that nobody agreed with him.

San Lin was the only son of Mon Ghine and had been very thoroughly spoiled for anything in life. Mon Ghine owned miles of paddy land in the Tennaserim Division and carried on a rich export trade in rice. He was a shrewd bargainer in most things but for once he reckoned without his host and that was when he sent him his son to England to study for the Bar. San Lin knew his London, but the London which he knew did not lie in the direction of the Inns of Court. His purse was long, thanks to a father who denied him nothing, and his relish for the good things of life, keen and ardent. No wonder, then, that he gave himself up to a life of pleasure and did what he liked with himself, his time and his money. The long and short of it was that the took up with Norma Dare, his landlady's daughter, and inevitably came to the conclusion that life, without her, was not worth living. San Lin decided to marry her and wrote home for the parental blessing, but all that he got in reply was a peremptory summons to return home. He was too good a son to disobey and he left for Burma, promising Miss Dare that he would send for her after getting round his father. Arrived home, he found that Mon Ghine was firm as a rock and that he spoke his mind freely on the subject of his son's infatuation. He ordered San Lin to marry Ma Thet, the pretty daughter of U Po The, but now it was San Lin's turn to strike. What followed was what always happens when unsympathetic age places difficulties in the way of youthful love. San Lin sulked-the nearest a good Burman youth gets to in the way of insurrection-and there was a growing strain in his relations with his father. A state of armed neutrality came to prevail.

A year passed, and there was no knowing how long this state of affairs would have continued, or who would have given in when it came to the scratch. It soon came to pass, however, that Mon Ghine had to go to Penang in connection with his rice business. He sailed away one evening in the *Mintha*, as rotten a brig as ever did a coastal trade on the Gulf of Martaban. Soon a heavy gale was blowing, which increased in intensity as the night wore on. From his wooden chamber San Lin heard the billows roar and he was anxious for his father. His sleep was disturbed and when he woke up at dead of night with a start, he seemed to hear his father calling to him across the deep. At the moment he was not clear as to the message borne on the wind but, when he rose in the morning, after a night of almost feverous wakefulness, and learned that a ship had been driven in on the rocks and saw a floating mass of wreckage, he knew. He wept long and bitterly for his father and all his love came back to him a hundredfold. After some effort at recollection, he saw that his father's message was that he should build a *pya* on the sea-front for the protection of mariners. San Lin consulted the good *pongyi* Wizaya-the most learned monk from Moulmein to Ye-who advised him to set about building a *pya* at once. "It is your father's spirit crying for peace. He died in the grip of the waves and his released soul is tossed about in agony. Build a *pya*, so that your father's *nat* may reside there and bless you and watch over you." San Lin, touched in his tenderest part, set about the task forthwith and built a *pya* on a rocky promontory that jutted right out into the sea. He also put up a *pongyi chaung*, which provided accommodation for a dozen monks, and he persuaded the good monk Wizaya to take up his residence there. In the *pya* he installed four Buddhas, pictures, in stone, of peace and contemplative serenity, of which three faced the sea in three directions, while the fourth looked towards the land. Its spiritual efficacy is accounted great and the fisher-folk will tell you that, when high seas are on and the beach is flooded, no water ever gets into the pagoda. It is a haven of rest and peace, and a lovelier shrine does not exist on that breaker-beaten coast.

When the work was completed, San Lin wrote to Norma Dare, asking her to come and marry him. He had already told her of his father's death and the pious work in which he had been engaged. But when he got her reply, he felt as if he had been hit. It ran:

"I am afraid I have misunderstood my feelings. I like you immensely and have been very happy in your friendship. But I have looked into my mind carefully and I find I cannot love you. I think, dear San Lin, I will be out of place among your pagodas and *pwes*." Your father was much the wiser man. Take my advice and marry Ma Thet. You might do worse. I am returning your ring."

San Lin went and consulted the *pongyi* Wizaya. He said he would renounce the world and enter the *pongyi chaung*. But the monk told him, "No, my son. You are yet of this world. This *chaung* you may enter when you have overcome desire. You are not tired of life, you are only vexed. Forget the *feringhi* and take U Po The's daughter to wife. Your father's *nat* will bless you."

Sometime later, he heard that Miss Dare had married a cousin, a lanky, pasty-faced youth he remembered having seen on the premises at East Dulwich. The full moon of Tabaung came round and San Lins held a *pwe* which Ma Thet attended. In her pink *tamein* and crown of swathed hair she was most dainty and *chic* and very desirable in San Lin's eyes. San Lin married her shortly afterwards and there are good grounds for thinking that he realised how near he had been to missing a good thing.

"You are out this time, Ko Hla Tin," said the village. "San Lin has disproved your theory."

"No fear," said Ko Hla Tin, very superiorly, "he would have married the white girl if she would have let him. His plans have miscarried. It is Mon Ghine's *nat*, which now inhabits the *pya*, which has gone and changed her mind. "If he had known", he said, in deliberate tones, "if he had known, San Lin would never have built the *pya*."

You cannot blame Ko Hla Tin. He was as God made him and God had made him that way.

Glossary

Pya—A Buddhist pagoda.

Pongyi—A Buddhist priest.

Pongyi chaung—A Buddhist monastery.

Nat—A spirit, a spiritual being.

Pwe—An entertainment, generally a theatrical show.

Feringhi—Foreigner.

Tabaung—A month in the Burmese calendar.

Tamein— A skirt.

A DEBT DISCHARGED

You were recently told by one * amply endowed with the literary graces of the narrow shave which Rao Bahadur Suryaprakasa Pantulu had over the affair of Jibbu, the aboriginal Quill. You have been assured that he will be D. I. G. and a Dewan Bahadur. I have no doubt he will be these and a great deal more besides. I know enough to assert that he is bent on being a C. I. E. and Commissioner of Police, Madras City. I am not sure he is not hoping, in his most secret heart, to be made a knight. Suryaprakasa is not by any means the sort of person who wears his heart on his sleeve, but I can venture a near guess that, in odd moments, as for instance, when a Governor has concluded his visit and given him a warm handshake and a pleasant word or after a friendly letter from the I. G. or the Member in charge, his fancy turns to thoughts of knighthood. Suryaprakasa knows that Metropoliton Police Commissioners get knighted once in a way. And if Fortune should continue to smile on him, a Royal visit might synchronise with his charge of the city and the thing might be done.

You have been told that Suryaprakasa is a Rao Bahadur; but I lay you ten to one that you don't know how exactly he came by it. You may know in a general sort of way that it was for his smart work in running down the Gondaprolu Gollaru. More, you are not likely to know. Three persons alone were aware of the exact part played by Suryaprakasa in that deal and these were Sub-Inspector Seshachellam, Suryaprakasa and myself. Seshachellam has since died and can tell no tales. Suryaprakasa, though living, is sure

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* Mr. Hilton Brown (H. B. of Punch.)

to follow the example of the dead in this respect. I alone remain to serve the interests of truth and I have been carrying the secret with me for so long that I had better get it off my mind. And no harm is likely to come of it either, seeing that I am only writing to the papers which, we have the authority of Kipling, is only "worse than serving in a shop or scaring off the crows."

It all happened in his Inspector days; just before he became Deputy Superintendent. He had been on long leave, scouring the Presidency for a bridegroom for his eldest daughter and then marrying her off. When he returned to duty at the end of it, he was posted to the Jalakole circle of the Chitragunta district. It was a far cry from his homeland and Suryaprakasa begged to be kept at Bommari, but the I. G. wouldn't hear of it. So to Chitragunta he came and reported himself to Derek Hardless, the D. S. P. Time was when Hardless had been the idol of the service, but latterly he had turned sour, peevish and altogether disagreeable. He had been passed over for promotion and he suffered from a most painful and annoying affliction which made life an intolerable burden to him. And just when a woman's ministrations would have brought him some comfort, his wife left him. (It was said that she had run away with Rouse, the planter, but I cannot vouch for it.) He had the cursedest temper of anyone in the service and if there was ever a subordinate of his who liked meeting him, I do not know him. Hardless became a decided misanthrope and preferred to transact his business with his subordinates on paper, employing a style which made them squirm. His words had a biting quality, they seemed to sneer and snarl at one. When Suryaprakasa presented himself at the bungalow and said he had come to pay his respects to the D. S. P, Hardless replied, "Take them as paid. Anything else?"

Suryaprakasa was taken aback by this brusquerie. He was the sort of person who liked to establish a good understanding with the D. S. P. the very first time they met. He answered, "Nothing, Sir. I wanted to remain at Bommari. The I. G. was particular that I should come here."

"I was not pining for you. Tell the I. G. he may take you back if he likes."

"I am not complaining, sir. I will gladly stay. I rounded up a gang of Capemaries at Gundla before I went on leave." Hardless was frankly scornful.

"Capemaries be hanged!" he shouted. "If you are up to any work, go and try your hand on the Gollaru."

Suryaprakasa thought the D. S. P. was coming round and tried to follow up the advantage.

"I will do my best, Sir, I assure you," said Suryaprakasa. Hardless glared for a moment. Then, turning round in his chair, he screamed.

"Don't brag, Sir. Go and do it if you can. *Go*."

This man, Suryaprakasa thought, was a brute. In all his seventeen years' service he had never come across a D. S. P. like this. He pocketed the insult, saluted and left.

The Gondaprolu Gollaru inhabited the slopes of the Nagamalais in the north-west corner of the district. They led apparently quite decent lives, living in houses of their own and cultivating large patches of land, for which they paid *kist* regularly. They hadn't been registered yet, but if ever there was a criminal tribe, they were one. They were really an offshoot of the

Donga Dasaries, though they ranked above them in the social scale and claimed to be descended from Mota, the mythical ancestor of the Lumbadis. They bore a most evil reputation. They were expert, cattle-lifters and house - dacoits and went in occasionally for a little murder. *Loot* was their main object and, if human lives stood in the way, they took them without scruple to gain their object. Withal, they had the cunning of the devil and eluded the law as no criminal tribe had yet done. They had an extensive connection with the village headmen, silver and copper and goldsmiths of the neighbourhood. Between fear and friendliness, nobody would give evidence against them—no, not even Chenga Reddi, the Taluk Board President, who owned land thereabouts and was supposedly a man of great influence. They had recently held up His Majesty's mails and looted the District Magistrate's baggage. There was a loud outcry, the D. M. was furious and there were questions in the Legislative Council.

When Suryaprakasa took over at Jalakole, the mail-dacoity case had 'fizzled out' and the sensation had died down. There was not a scrap of evidence and the Sessions Judge had thrown out the case with a pungent remark against the Sub-Inspector who had investigated it. (The poor man had done his absolute best, but the witnesses had turned hostile. He promptly went away on long leave and nightly dreamt of Hardless pursuing him over the Nagamalais in the very shape of the devil.) Suryaprakasa made a report on the case, which Hardless returned without a word. When, a fortnight later, he sent in a longish report suggesting that security proceedings be started against the Gollaru, Hardless sent it back with a savage endorsement that he had better not waste time writing longwinded rigmaroles but concentrate on the business on hand. He asked him to set about collecting the needed evidence and gave him six weeks to do it in. Suryaprakasa swore by all his family gods that he would not rest till he had done it. This D. S. P. was the stiffest fence he had come up with till then and he was not going to funk it. It was a point of honour with him to bring this nasty—tempered Englishman to heel.

Suryaprakasa took down the old files of his circle and rummaged among them for material. He was just beginning to get the hang of it when his wife was taken with labour pains and presented him with his first boy —the son and heir for whom he had been longing all his life. But the child's horoscope showed that he was afflicted with a malefic Moon, unfavourably situated in the Fourth House. Nothing could be worse for the mother. And, to confirm his worst fears, the good lady caught a cold and developed a fever. Incantations, vows, prayers offered personally and by proxy became his sole concern and he could not do a stroke of work for attending on her. It was a very anxious time for him. Nearly a month elapsed before she was out of danger. The work of his circle was all in arrears and the matter of the Gollaru had not advanced an inch. There were only two weeks left and it seemed more than likely that Suryaprakasa would come under the D.S.P.'s envenomed lash.

It was then that one day Suryaprakasa, in the course of a conversation at the Club, opened his heart to me. Contrary to his habit, he grew confidential. (It might be that he felt drawn to me as being the only one among the dozen or so of us young men who met of an evening to play badminton or bridge to show him some deference). He spoke to me of his rash promise to the District Superintendent of Police and how he had only a fortnight in which to collect and correlate the evidence against the Gollaru. Unless he managed to send in a detailed report whereon security proceedings could be started his reputation would be clean gone. It was then that I gave him an idea. I told him that Seshachalam was the man he should meet. We had been at college together and, more by accident than of set purpose, he had found his way into the police. People said that he was meant for better things than to rot in a poky police station, but there he was and seemed likely to continue all his life. He was a queer, fanciful sort of fellow and used to amuse himself looking up the Gollaru during the intervals of his work, which lay in the prosecuting line. He gave them quite a lot of attention and made a special study of their ways, and their origins and had analysed their recent criminal activities with a professional eye. His idea was to take them in hand, reclaim them and turn them into honest ways of living. One old-time Deputy Superintendent whom he had tried to interest in the matter gave him no encouragement. But Seshachalam continued collecting his data, against the day when a friendly District Superintendent of Police might look on his views with favour. Poor man, he developed a malignant kind of dyspepsia and went on leave, extending it every three months. He was in his village thirty miles away, across the border. Suryaprakasa pricked up his ears and said he would go and meet him. He asked me for a letter of introduction and I gladly gave him one.

When next I met Suryaprakasa, he had been to Chavadi and returned. He was profuse in his acknowledgments to me and to Seshachalam who, he said, was an extraordinarily clever fellow, only not very practical. He said he would get him a big reward when all the Gollaru had been put away in jail. Meanwhile, he was very particular that I should keep the whole thing confidential. He said, "This is such a dirty department, you know. Jealous fellows, all around. In a case like this, one should not take any risks. Your friend Seshachalam will appreciate."

I readily agreed. You know that Suryaprakasa is a "fine upstanding man with a fine upstanding voice." He was so palpably a man of action, so shrewd and discerning, that you felt he must be right.

He showed me Seshachalam's notebook written in his clerkly hand. It was a monument of industry. It recorded the doings of the Gondaprolu Gollaru during a period of two years ending with the mail-dacoity. The Gollaru had been treated under various heads. The first related to their customs and ethnic affinities. Next, there was a census of the active and able-bodied members among them and their criminal history. Then followed statistics of crime in which they had been concerned, the *modus operandi* in each case and the common features which linked them up to a common agency. Ganga Dasu, the wizard-leader of the tribe, had a chapter all to himself and his connection with all the reported offences was traced. In all, sixty-four distinct offences, cattle-thefts, burglaries, house-dacoities and murder had been brought under review. There were schedules annexed, describing the implements used by the Gollaru, the marks left by them on walls, under door-bolts and other places dear to the policeman. There were explanatory charts showing the movement of crime and its local incidence. At the end, there was a brief statement of the evidence whereby all the offences were to be proved and a list of a hundred and twenty witnesses was appended. And the whole thing was written with the utmost lucidity and clearness. One felt one could send the whole gang to jail on the strength of it.

Suryaprakasa then got to work on his report. During the ensuing fortnight, he did not come to the Club. He made consequential visits to various places in the neighbourhood and created the impression that he was hard at work. I ran into him once or twice on my way to Court and he would nod cheerfully and call out that he was frightfully busy.

Orders arrived in due course, sanctioning security action being taken against the Gollaru. A special staff was given to Suryaprakasa to help him to get the witnesses together, to hearten them up and generally run the proceedings without a hitch. The District Magistrate decided he would not give the vakils a chance—who for all that one may say, do hamper the course of justice.) He was not going to grant adjournments, which meant tampering with witnesses or discovering reported cases, which seemed designed to keep prosecutions out of their own. He camped at the Nagamalais from time to time, went on with the enquiry almost continuously and finally passed orders binding nearly two score of Gollaru to keep the peace for two years. They could not offer the required sureties and they all went to jail.

Suryaprakasa was in high feather. The Inspector-General of Police sent him a warm letter of congratulation. More formal, but nonetheless warm was Hardless' official communication that "the District Superintendent of Police congratulates the Inspector on his excellent work in running down the Gondaprolu Gollaru." That was his supreme triumph. Hardless brought to heel! Shortly afterwards, there appeared a Government Order, granting him a reward of a thousand rupees. We, who were in the know, knew that more was coming. I reminded Suryaprakasa of his kind promise about Seshachalam. Seshachalam was at the end of his tether. His health was giving way and he could not keep his wasted body and soul together on a Sub-Inspector's leave allowances. A substantial money reward would have given the poor fellow a chance. Suryaprakasa spoke in cautious accents. He said he would see about it in good time. "The D. S. P. is a queer sort of man, you know" he said, puckering his eyebrows. It sent a chill to my heart, to hear him talk like that.

The Birthday Honours were announced, and there was a Rao Bahadur for Suryaprakasa. Meanwhile, on the recommendation of the Inspector-General of Police he had been promoted Deputy Superintendent and, at his own request, retained at Chitragunta. A *darbar* was held and the District Magistrate made a great speech sketching the career of Suryaprakasa ever since he was born. He spoke of the *pial* school where he had studied, the fifteen-rupee clerkship with which he had begun his long and useful career in the public service, and even mentioned his smart arrest of Jibbu. He had "capped his distinguished career by his splendid work in connection with the rounding up of the Gondaprolu Gollaru. By his own unaided efforts, he had succeeded in collecting convincing evidence of their nefarious doings which, it seemed at one time, could not be checked. He had carried his researches into their customs and ethnic origins, and his report on the Gollaru was a remarkable document which could usefully form a chapter in any book on the castes and tribes of India."

Seshachalam, who was making a fight for his life joined at Jalakole for a few days before going away on leave again. I could see he had not long to live. One day he brought me a copy of Suryaprakasa's report on the Gollaru. I read it and it all seemed familiar. Where had I read it before? Then it flashed on me, it was Seshachalam's note-book presented in typescript, the same heads, the same treatment, the very words, without a 't' crossed or an 'i' dotted. So, this was the remarkable document, done in the spirit of a scholar!

I was furious. Now, wasn't it incredibly foolish of Seshachalam to have handed the note-book to him, just for the asking.

"I didn't. He just helped himself to it" answered Seshachelam. "I was very ill at the time and in bed. I gave him a good many tips and let him look into my camp-box for a few old reports and judgments. He appears to have seen the note-book there and he took it without anybody being the wiser." The mean cat! I asked Seshachalam to make a fight for it, to show him up. But, no, Seshachalam's body was weak and his spirit wasn't willing. "It is only my word against his. I cannot even make myself heard," said Seshachalam, resignedly. "Men who would spar with Rao Bahadurs and gazetted officers need a lot of weapons I don't possess. Let him get the credit. After all I am a dying man. Probably"—this in a voice which trailed away like one speaking in a dream, "Probably I was indebted to him in my past birth and it has been ordained that I should pay him in this way."

The District Magistrate's speech was reported in *The Hindu.* I took a cutting and have preserved it to this day. To me, it held a moral. Where Seshachalam sowed, Suryaprakasa reaped. And, unlike what happens in field-harvestings, he not only reaped an abundant harvest but got the credit for the sowing as well.

Seshachalam died shortly afterwards, leaving his wife a thatched house and five hundred rupees of debts. His creditors sold the house for three hundred and divided it rateably among themselves. Seshachalam still owes them two hundred. I suppose he will pay it in his next birth.

Anyway, if at the next dissolution of the world, when the veil should be lifted, Seshachalam, Hardless and Suryaprakasa should meet in another sphere, I should not like to be Suryaprakasa. I would much rather be Ganga Dasu, the wizard-leader, or Jibbu, the Quill.

ASTROLOGER

WHEN Mahadeva Sastri of Mailam lost his third wife, there was much speculation as to who was going to be his fourth. Alamelu Ammal had been ailing for some considerable time, but her end had come somewhat suddenly. And the ashes of her cremated body had not had time to cool before the good people of Mailam began to canvass the question of her probable successor. That Mahadeva Sastri would take a fourth wife was taken for granted and the only disagreement was about the interval that would elapse before he made his fourth venture in matrimony. As it was still early in the month of *Ani*, the majority were inclined to the view that the wedding would come off soon after thirteenth–day ceremony was over. But a few dissentients took the more practical view that, as Mahadeva Sastri could not well marry before he had made his choice of a partner, the wedding could not take place earlier than the month of *Avani*. This would give Mahadeva Sastri a good forty days to look about him and make his choice and complete the negotiations which must necessarily precede a settlement.

Mahadeva Sastri was the big man of the village of Mailam. He was the Mirasdar and the richest man for miles around. His father had died while Mahadeva was at school and, after a few manful efforts to matriculate, Mahadeva gave up the profitless struggle and, like a sensible man, returned to his village to look after the ancestral acres. He took a wife, or rather, a wife was found for him, and Mahadeva soon settled down to the life of a confirmed landowner. He had lived in the village all his life and had rarely left it to travel to the outside world. He radiated within the immediate neighbourhood of Mailam, wherein was collected the circle of his relations. And the only occasion when he was called upon to undertake the risk of a long journey was when his lawyer called him up to Madras in connection with a litigation which he had started and successfully prosecuted as a reversionary heir. He was now content to stay in the village and administer his property, though his method of administration was simple. Mahadeva Sastri was silent as the Sphinx and not even his closest associates had heard him deliver himself of three sentences at a stretch. Grunts, signs and an indistinctly-enunciated phrase were his ordinary vehicles of expression. He had an agent or two under him, but, really, the flourishing condition of his estate was proof of the fact that the landowner's physical presence on the land was enough to ensure its sound administration.

Mahadeva Sastri, at the time of this narrative, was turned fifty-two. The appearance of youth which a remarkable freedom from greyness of the hair was supposed to give him was spoiled by his enormous fatness. He had grown rounder and rounder with the passing of the years, till his paunch glowed like a ripe pumpkin glistening in the December sun, while his spacious cheeks and down-growing chin seemed to squeeze his neck out of view. Whether it was cause or effect, one cannot tell, but Mahadeva Sastri had a rooted disinclination to move. He was an early riser and after an early *chota*, which was always a substantial affair of fat rice-cakes and unlimited coffee, he could be seen squatting on his *pial*, chewing betel and tobacco from out of a lavishly-provided betel-box. His interrupted English education had bred in him a love of the world's news and he regularly subscribed for *The Hindu*. The previous day's paper lay in front, awaiting the arrival of Ramu, a 'failed Intermediate' who read aloud for Mahadeva Sastri's delectation. Mahadeva never touched the paper himself. The effort was too much for him. People from the *agraharam* would come and go during the forenoon (for Mahadeva Sastri never quitted the *pial* or his squatting posture till dinner-time) listening to translated scraps of news and passing running comments of wonder thereupon. At midday, Mahadeva Sastri would disappear indoors to bathe, eat and sleep, to be seen again on the *pial* at four. His afternoon coffee was brought to him there by his cook and the morning's ritual would be repeated till sundown, when he usually went out to exercise his limbs by a leisurely stroll in the back-garden. After an early supper, he retired to bed upstairs (it was really a garret) and for the first time in the day gave himself up to the wife of his bosom. People in the village regularly wondered what Mahadeva Sastri said to his wife. A legend had, however, gained currency that his second wife, a spirited young woman, the daughter of a Government servant, had once mildly shocked her silent lord by exclaiming. "It's like my stupidity to talk to you, sitting there like a stone belly-god." With her arm round part of his neck, she had pleaded for a sapphire necklace, like the one which the Deputy Collector's wife wore, and though poor Mahadeva had agreed, the grunted intimation he gave of it had seemed to convey the exact opposite. He was, however, very much liked by his succeeding wives and by all the village, for he was a generous soul and would not harm a fly. He kept open house all the year round without making any fuss about it. Anyone who cared could enter the big dining-hall at dinner-time and setting a leaf before him, be sure of a hearty meal.

But there was one fly in the ointment. Mahadeva Sastri's heart's desire was to have a son, but it had not pleased God to grant him one. Ever since his first marriage, Mahadeva had longed for a son with a vaguely insistent longing, which grew with the years in intensity. If you had asked him, he would not have been able to give tongue to that overmastering desire. But there it was and he got his solace from his firm belief that he was destined to have a son, though curiously enough destiny was holding off tantalisingly. For had not Garudachari, who knew the Heavens inside out, foretold the birth of a son and had not the son arrived though dead before he was born ? And according to that infallible astrologer, the son would have been born alive and risen to rank and fame, had not at the very moment of his birth, a malefic conjunction of planets brought about the mother's death and, with it, dashed out the life from the unborn babe. The same Garudachari had sworn by the cadjan leaves of his lore, that Mahadeva Sastri would yet fondle a son and heir. And in his day-dreams, Mahadeva Sastri visualised a fat, brown, naked baby-boy, decked with bangles of gold, giggling from his perch on his father's knees, or held in the arms of his farm-servant, Sadayan, for all to see and admire. Mahadeva Sastri was twenty-eight when his first wife died and he was much distraught, but within a month of her demise, he married Kamakshi, the well-grown daughter of a pompous official, bursting with self-esteem, but notoriously lacking in the wherewithal to get his four daughters suitably married. She was a woman of spirit and the only one among Mahadeva's wives to give him an occasional dressing-down. Two girls had been born to her, both of whom were happily married to prosperous landowners of the neighbourhood, much to the chagrin of their mother, who wanted one of them, at least, to be an official's wife. Mahadeva was more than forty-five when Kamakshi Ammal died of enteric fever. He was overcome by grief for nearly two months, when despite the hints, threats and sermons of his daughters (themselves rich in sons, eminently adoptable) and the members of their families, he took a third wife to his bosom. This was a shy, retiring girl, who accepted her elderly husband with fortitude and resignation, and bore the affronts of her step-daughters (who were really older than she) with the patience of Nallathangal. She presented her husband with a daughter, who was growing up into a very pretty girl. But the long-expected son and heir had not arrived, though to Mahadeva Sastri's scarcely-expressed longing, his wife added daily adoration of son-providing deities, and fasted for half the month, eating enormous quantities of pepper on days when the Pleiades reigned and made regular *pradakshinams* of the sacred *peepul* tree. But she grew weak and was soon in the grip of a consuming asthma, to which she ultimately succumbed, leaving her husband a widower for the third time.

Whether Mahadeva Sastri's course of life would have been different, if only one or other of his wives had borne him a son, we cannot say. But the craving for a son and heir had taken such a hold over him that he could not rest till he had secured the succession to his vast estate, and the post-mortem happiness of his own soul in the person of a son of his very own. Mahadeva Sastri had lost the nimbleness of youth (though one could not remember his ever having been either nimble or young) and motion was a matter of no inconsiderable dificulty to him. Yet he believed himself equal to another experiment in the matrimonial line. The village, which genuinely loved Mahadeva Sastri, while extracting every ounce of merriment from his unabated passion for the married state, believed so too. And, having pursued the matter with interested insistence, it had made up its mind that the fortunate girl was going to be Subbammal, the last of Vengu Aiyar's eight daughters. Vengu Aiyar was the proud possessor of two acres of land, a thatched house, whose roof was always falling in, eight daughters, of whom seven had married elderly husbands regularly at sixteen, and a wife who had a tongue and knew how to use it. Until his first three daughters were married, the village looked on Vengu Aiyar with sympathy, for does not the proverb say, "Even a king, should he have five daughters, will soon become a mendicant?" But with Vengu Aiyar's success in marrying off his daughters, sympathy turned to envy. Vengu Aiyar's ways were striking. He would disappear one fine morning in the marriage season to attend a wedding, or may be, a funeral. The next that the village heard about it was when, a few days later, Vengu Aiyar descended on it and carried off all his family to celebrate the marriage of one of his daughters, in the bridegroom's house or at some village shrine.

Seven of them were married, of whom four were second wives and three third wives, and the youngest bridegroom had been forty. They were all exceedingly well-off, occupying good positions as vakils, public officials or landholders. Five of his sons-in law were older than Vengu Aiyar, and if they did not render unto him the homage that was due to a father-in-law, it is no matter for surprise. Vengu Aiyar was content to grow fat on the secret bounty of his married daughters. And the appetite had come with the eating, and he had long expressed the view that the older the husband, the better for the girl (and the parents of the girl, added the cynics of the village). It therefore stood to reason and was certainly within the bounds of possibility that the last of Vengu Aiyar's daughters should wed Mahadeva Sastri. Vengu Aiyar had already pricked up his ears and was on the alert. He was not, however, going to broach the subject himself. Success in seven ventures had given him an easy confidence, and he waited for the offer to proceed from Mahadeva Sastri. The village, however, as one man, had made up its mind, and wondered why the announcement had not been made, though it was nearly six weeks since Alamelu Ammal had passed away and the month of *Ani* was approaching its end.

II

Now it happened that there was in the village a girl of the name of Kamala. She was the daughter of Ramasubbu Aiyar, who had been a Revenue Inspector, of great probity but extreme tactlessness. And he had lost his job for contradicting his superiors, who loved to find fault. People remembered the days when Ramasubbu was a personable young man and held his head high. But misfortune had told upon him and his incurable poverty (in fact, he was now dependant for his livelihood upon his wife's brother, who sent him a few bags of rice every year and some occasional cash) had brought a vacant stare to his eyes and an insipid garrulousness to his tongue. He often rattled on with a certain abstract irrelevance that made one suspect a little softening of the brain. But for his wife, who was a managing sort of woman, there is no knowing where he would have been. Kamala was their first first-born and was the pride and solace of their parents. She was nearly fifteen and, shocking to tell, unmarried. She was of surpassing beauty, and her well-formed features gave her the appearance of seventeen. All her contemporaries had passed into the happy state and Visalam, who had been born on the same day as she, had been married four years now and had a baby boy already. Wasn't it a shocking scandal to keep a grown-up girl like that unmarried? The matrons of the village who had fondled Kamala as a child now turned against her and her parents, and wondered what the world was coming to. Someone had ventured to say, "What can he do? He is so poor, and marriage means such an awful lot of money." Grandmother Seshi, the oldest woman in the village, had turned on him and rent him like a dog. "What does that signify? Do you mean, then, that she is to remain unmarried all her life? Have not there been poor people before and did they keep their girls unmarried? The world is going to the dogs. And this wretched English education has knocked the last vestige of Brahminism out of you. Shut up, you feckless wretch, a few more like you, and it would be enough to bring the Brahmin world to dissolution." Needless to say, Ramu, 'the failed Intermediate' (it was he who had ventured to speak up) was silenced.

This was the way the village, in general, talked. They seemed to pay no heed to the obvious pain of mind of the harassed parents of the girl, or to her own shrinking sensitiveness. Kamala, indeed, had been marked out for derision ever since she was twelve. And when she was thirteen, the dread whisper had gone forth that she was woman-grown, and past the time when she could have been married according to the *shastras*. Theirs was a house of sorrow, and an unhappier couple did not drag their miserable existence in that neighbourhood.

It was about this time that Mahadeva Sastri got, what one might term, a brain wave. It had come upon him suddenly and held him in its grip. One cool morning, he caught sight of Kamala, returning from her bath, 'fresh as the foam' with water from the tank. And instantly, he found himself keenly desiring her. Mahadeva was quick to act. He revolved the matter in his mind for one whole day, and the more he thought of it, the better he liked it. The next morning he was on the *pial* a trifle earlier than usual, with a fixed look in his eyes. He was scanning the street—not for Kamala, for he was now on business bent and looking for her father—and soon he saw Ramasubbu Aiyar, who was on his way to the tank. Mahadeva Sastri beckoned to him and Ramasubbu came wondering. For never before had the Mirasdar exerted himself to invitation. He came and sat on the *pial* and awaited developments. Full five minutes elapsed and Mahadeva Sastri had not opened his lips. *The Hindu* lay in front unopened, the betel-box was uncared for and Sadayan, the farm-servant, was tending the cattle tethered in front. It was after all Ramasubbu Aiyar who broke the silence by a question which bore a discreet accent of sympathy for the widowed man.

"I suppose the household affairs are going on properly?"

A nod.

"Anyway, you do not deserve this blow. You have been a good man and she was there, like Mahalakshmi, never saying, "Nay" to a hungry man."

Silence and a two-minutes interval.

Then Mahadeva Sastri, making a huge effort, asked Ramasubbu, "Any word of marriage in your house?"

"Where is one to go for marriage?" burst out Ramasubbu Aiyar. "I have left everything in the hands of God."

Mahadeva Sastri eyed him interrogatively.

"Yes", continued Ramasubbu, "If God was pleased to send me a daughter, He ought to have given me the means to get her married."

Varan ?" asked Mahadeva Sastri, meaning whether, taking the means for granted, he had any boy in view.

"Why worry about a *varan* when I have not the means to marry her to a cook? I thought of giving her in marriage to the *karnam's* son, but he won't look at her unless he is given a thousand rupees in cash and five hundred rupees worth of vessels, to say nothing of the jewels I must present the girl with. And they want a four-days' marriage into the bargain. Time was when I thought I could marry her in a manner befitting her beauty and sweet disposition. But that is all a lost dream now. Had I but a hundredth of your means, Mirasdar, it would be different. As it is, talk of marriage is not for the like of me."

There was a pause and Ramasubbu Aiyar's eyes glistened. He bravely repressed his tears.

"Have you got her horoscope ?" asked Mahadeva Sastri.

"Yes", answered Ramasubbu, wondering.

"Bring it."

Ramasubbu started. Was it all a dream, and what was the meaning of it ? Did Mahadeva Sastri know of anybody who was willing to marry Kamala with all her worldly deficiencies ? Or did he, in a spasm of charity, intend to defray the expenses of her wedding ? Or, was it,—Could Mahadeva Sastri ?—No. That could not be. Fifty-two and fat ! Ramasubbu Aiyar's mind refused to work. He went home, sort of dazed, and without telling even his wife, returned with a dirty sheet of notepaper with dabs of saffron at the edges and handed it to the Mirasdar. It was Kamala's horoscope. Mahadeva Sastri signed to his servant to fetch his 'hand-box' where he kept a few bonds and promissory notes and his own horoscope. He copied out the planetary positions and gave it to Ramasubbu. Mahadeva Sastri was not a compelling sort of person by any means who carried everything before him. But Ramasubbu found himself doing as he was bid and received the copy almost mechanically.

"Consult Garudachari" said Mahadeva Sastri. "Don't say it is mine."

Ramasubbu Aiyar was not quite clear in his mind as to his position. It was obvious that the Mirasdar wanted Kamala for himself. Kamala, his beautiful Kamala, to become the wife of this fat, overgrown person, who was old enough to be her grandfather! But the money side of it, the certainty of a life of comfort and freedom from care! Kamala, ruling Mahadeva Sastri, the mistress of vast wealth, relieving the grinding misery of her parents! Yes, his darling son could have an education. Round him he had woven his ambitions. How he longed to give that sprightly, bright-eyed lad, a bringing-up such as would help to rehabilitate the family! But then Kamala, to be the wife of that fat, wheezy person! Oh God, God! A prey to conflicting emotions, he went and showed Garudachari the two horoscopes.

"Whose is this?" asked Garudachari, referring to Mahadeva Sastri's horoscope. It bore neither name nor date of birth. That was Mahadeva Sastri's slyness, as he reckoned it. He did not want his plans to be known.

"It is somebody's from near Tanjore", said Ramasubbu, evasively.

"How old is the boy ?"

"About twenty-two they say", answered Ramasubbu.

Just a hint of a smile passed under the shaggy moustache of Garudachari. He carried the horoscopes of the whole village in his head and speedily sensed what the game was. Seated on a ragged rattan mattress, in front of a rough wooden box which did duty for a table, with the lore of his craft arranged in slovenly piles behind him, Ganana Garudachari looked the very embodiment of secret knowledge. He was skilled in his craft and honestly believed in it. There were few works, Western or Oriental, on astrology which he had not read and mastered. But withal, he was a very human person and had a keen sense of humour. He had known Kamala ever since she was a baby and was one of the very few who dared to take up the side of her long-suffering parents, when the wiseacres of the village were shocked at the very thought of her enforced non-conformity. Mahadeva Sastri had a profound regard for Garudachari, who loved him in return. But Garudachari could not stomach the idea of a union between the Mirasdar and Kamala. He had other views about her marriage. But he was not going to be indiscreet. Further, the whole affair held such a promise of fun as rarely came in one's way in that sleepy neighbourhood and he was going to make the most of it while it lasted. He scanned the horoscope intently and made rapid calculations on the available spaces which he could pinch out of the sheets of paper which had been written on and lay about in clumsy profusion. He played his part to perfection and Ramasubbu Aiyar looked on expectantly. The battle of emotions in his mind had ceased for a while. In the end, Garudachari said, "This is a good horoscope. The native will be long-lived, rich and very happy".

"How is his *putrabhava* ?" asked Ramasubbu,

"The native will have sons late in life".

"Which means ?" interrupted Ramasubbu Aiyar.

"Say, when the native is about fifty years of age. Much, however, depends upon the girl's horoscope", replied Garudachari.

"What is Kamala's like in that respect ?"

"Splendid. I have often told you that she is bound to make a happy marriage. My dear man, you are going to be pestered with numerous grandchildren, mark you".

"Do the two horoscopes agree ?" finally asked Ramasubbu.

"I should think so" replied the astrologer. "Fix it up, man, and your poverty will cease. The boy" Garudachari could scarce repress a smile, "the boy will have pots of money. I have often told you that Kamala will make a lucky marriage and that the restoration of your fortunes depends on her. But don't forget me in your prosperity, But, pray, who is the boy ?"

"I will tell you later" said Ramasubbu and hurried home to consult his wife,

Garudachari forthwith repaired to the house of his nephew, Rama Rao, a law student, who was home for the vacation and told him in confidence that the Mirasdar was arranging to wed Kamala and that, if his friend did not look sharp, the bird would have flown. "Tell that modernised ass that he may play the *dorai* on hill-stations, later."

Rama Rao and Krishnamurti were old school—fellows and the latter was a great favourite of Garudachari who loved him as his own son. Alone among the English-educated youths of the village, Krishnamurthi had early shown a gratifying respect for Garudachari and his elusive science. Though he pretended to despise the new social ideas which threatened to sweep away the existing order, Garudachari had a secret symathy for what he called "this evolutionary phase" and he looked with unconcealed favour on the understanding which, though unspoken, he knew did exist between Krishnamurti and Kamala.

III

Ramasubbu Aiyar took his wife aside and told her all that had happened. She listened with breathless interest, and the rice-pot boiling inside was unheeded and got over-cooked. The poor lady, like her husband, was torn between a violent disapproval of the man and an equally violent appreciation of his means. Her first expression of opinion, however, was against the idea. "Give it up. We may throw her into the well rather than at that old man's head."

"But, my dear," remonstrated her husband, "have you anyone more suitable? She can at least be sure of a home and her daily bread. Who knows what Heaven's pleasure may be? Have not girls married older men before and been happy and the mothers of thriving families?"

"Put that way, it does not appear half bad," conceded his wife. "We can at least escape the calumny of keeping her unwedded. I am worn to a shadow thinking of it."

"Since the Mirasdar appears keen, I think we may settle the alliance", suggested Ramasubbu Aiyar.

"Somehow I cannot bring myself to agree. Having seen her grow under our very eyes for fifteen years, to tie her up to such a man, how can you tolerate it ?" said his wife, and burst into sobs.

And so, on they talked, love of their darling daughter and dread of her unmarried condition contending for mastery. Ultimately the unhappy couple decided to submit to the 'flower test' and abide by the manifested will of the goddess they worshipped at home. Constant thinking of the comforts of the Mirasdar's establishment, the beautiful *saris* and the jewels of diamond and gold which his previous wives had worn and which were there ready to decorate the person of their successor and the certainty of their own troubles vanishing like dew before the sun had slowly reconciled them to the idea. And when the red oleander and the white lily were tied up into separate packets and placed before the goddess, they fervently hoped that their little son would pick up the lily. For if he took up the lily, it was to be understood as signifying the goddess' approval of the match and the oleander was to convey the contrary. The little fellow, enjoying the thing, fumbled among the two packets and having very nearly taken the lily, dropped it and handed up the oleander. The husband and wife looked at each other and were silent for a minute. Then they said in almost the same breath, "But it was the lily which he first took up".

"Let us try again," decided Mrs. Ramasubbu.

She rolled up the flowers and, after a prayer, which was really an appeal for an approving sign, that the goddess should lead the boy's fingers aright, she held up her arms in supplication and threw the packets before the goddess. The lad, this time without fumbling, took up the desired white flower. A smile overspread Mrs. Ramasubbu's features. "It's God's will", said she.

"To make sure, why not make a third and final trial?" suggested Ramasubbu Aiyar. He subconsciously thought that the goddess having once committed herself would not go back on it now.

"No," said his spouse, emphatically, "the goddess will is clear. She will never let us down."

She was not going to tempt fortune again.

Mahadeva Sastri put but one question when Ramasubbu came with the astrologer's opinion.

"*Putrabhavam*" ? asked he, meaning the House of Progeny.

"Exceedingly good, the astrologer says. As you desired, I was careful not to let him know it was your horoscope. He said you would have numerous boys after you were fifty."

One cannot blame Ramasubbu Aiyar if, in his innocence, he mixed up the astrologer's forecast of the numerical strength of Kamala's unborn children and his statement that the Mirasdar's chances of getting male issue improved after he attained fifty years of age.

Mahadeva Sastri was satisfied. The one baby-boy of his dreams now gave way to a number of his kind, distributed variously among his own knees, Sadayan's arms, his wife's hip and the back of an admiring friend. He did not propose to consult Garudachari himself, as that would mean a lot of unnecessary publicity and possible complications. He asked Ramasubbu Aiyar to fix up an auspicious date and decided they would go up quietly one morning to Komaramalai, the mountain-home of God Subramania, six miles away, and return the same evening, bringing home his beautiful bride.

turned up at the astrologer's house just exactly when Krishnamurti was closeted with him. Garudachari, after having very nearly driven the young man to the verge of despair by a good deal of unseasonable quizzing, explained to him how, as a result of his manœuvring the Mirasdar had been brought to heel.

"But why could you not have nipped the mischief in the bud?" asked Krishnamurti, with ill-concealed vexation. "If you had told Ramasubbu Aiyar that the horoscope did not agree, all this trouble would not have arisen."

"What a paragon of sense!" sarcastically exclaimed Garudachari. "Don't you understand, you fool, that, in that event, some other astrologer would have been consulted and the Mirasdar rushed into marrying. And would anything short of a cataclysm have brought you from your mountain-bred idleness and sloth and your ridiculous fad of marrying only after you get some employment? If you are not merely toying with the idea of marrying Kamala, do you consider it at all fair that you should put it off any longer? You must remember that she is virtually an outcaste now and a target for the gibes of every rake in the village."

Krishnamurti was a good-looking young man of one-and-twenty years. After taking his degree in Honours in History, he had joined the Law College and was expecting to set up practice the following July. He had lost his mother while he was yet very young and her place had been very inadequately filled by his father's second wife, who had her own children to look after. His father had given him a good education and had spared no pains towards that end. Krishnamurti was a great favourite in the village and ever since he was fifteen, they had sedulously proposed marriage for him.

It was a great grievance with them that his father had turned down many a desirable proposal and they ascribed it to the pernicious influence of his second wife. This was uncharitable, for the husband and wife had really pleaded hard with him to marry. When Deputy Collector Swaminatha Aiyar offered to give his only daughter in marriage to Krishnamurti with a dowry that made the mouths of every one in the village profusely water, his father moved heaven and earth to induce his son to marry. But he stood foursquare to the winds that blew. Krishnamurti had, what they called, ideas. He had early come under the influence of Professor Sadasiva Rao, who was a social reformer, and showed the social ills of his country in a painfully lurid light. And Krishnamurti had sworn before the altar of his conscience that he would never accept a pice of *varadakshina* (bridegroom price) and that when he married, it would be the girl of his choice. And, in fairness to him, when he heard his friends discussing his price as if he were a fatted calf, he found his whole moral nature surging up in uncontrollable indignation. In recent years, his heart had turned towards Kamala. Their houses were close to each other and the thought of the days when they had played together floated as a fragrant memory in his mind. Kamala's mother and his own had been great friends (a similarity of grievances regarding their respective mothers-in-law providing a bond of attachment) and they had often talked of a union between Kamala and Krishnamurti. Then the fortunes of Kamala's father hadn't sunk and they could well plan a marriage with the handsome son of Sundaramier. Krishnamurti frequently called at Kamala's house during his visits to the village and was received with effusive welcome by her mother. Kamala, prevented by the custom of the caste from talking to the grown-up young man was still near at hand, swelling with pleasure at his references to her. When her parents, in their crushing poverty, had given up thinking of Krishnamurti, Kamala used to pray to the goddess at home with all the intensity of her fifteen summers, that she might wed Krishnamurti and none other. Ever since this talk of marrying her to the Mirasdar had started, she had redoubled her prayers, made endless vows for deliverance and spent her days in mingled apprehension and hope. The poor child had but the vaguest intimations of the misery of marriage with a very much overgrown male animal. Yet she dreaded the prospect with a nameless fear and prayed, night and day, that the calamity be averted, by her death, if need be.

V

It was about ten o'clock when Garudachari was seated on Mahadeva Sastri's *pial*, spectacles on nose and almanacs and loose sheets of paper surrounding him. Ramu was there, and Rama Rao too, who dropped in, as if by accident.

" It is not satisfactory ", said the astrologer, after a long pause in the conversation, with apparent reluctance.

Mahadeva Sastri raised his eyebrows questioningly.

" Well, that's my opinion. I cannot alter the facts. Once you ask my candid opinion, I should give it, shouldn't I ? " said Garudachari, with disarming impartiality.

" Ramasubbu Aiyar said otherwise ", said Mahadeva Sastri.

" Quite likely. And I see what you are driving at," spoke up Garudachari. " He never told me whose horoscope it was. He just said it was a boy's and I could not guess that the boy was fifty-two years old. There was no date to the horoscope and I was given only the planetary positions. Somewhat unusual, of course, but there it was, and I had to make the best of it. I was told the boy was twenty-two and I worked out that the girl had a good thirty years of married life before her. On the strength of this, I said the horoscopes agreed, minor points being satisfactory." All this without turning a hair.

Mahadeva Sastri could not follow Garudachari's meaning. His face showed he was no wiser than before. Rama Rao voiced the Mirasdar's thoughts as if they were his own. "Your meaning is not clear. If she has thirty years of married life before her, it is an added recommendation. Our friend will live up to eighty-two and that is a great age is it not?"

"Remember, Sir", answered Garudachari with great earnestness, "I was given a horoscope said to be that of a boy aged twenty-two. Thirty plus twenty-two makes fifty-two and I thought that was a good enough age as lives go nowadays. About his fifty-second year, the native comes under the influence of a particularly malignant Saturn, acting in conjunction with a by-no-means well-placed *Rahu*, both of whom are highly adverse to the girl's fortunes. A union between this girl and the Mirasdar cannot make for any of the good things we hope for from the married state." And with a few discreet and impressive phrases and still more impressive suppressions, Ganana Garudachari conveyed the notion that the surest way of depriving the good people of Mailam of the benevolent presence of the Mirasdar was to bring about his marriage with the daughter of Ramasubbu Aiyar.

This was a regular bomb-shell. Mahadeva Sastri started in his seat and a horrified look came into his eyes. Anyday his love of life was stronger than his love of male progeny. Garudachari followed up his advantage by embarking upon an apparently most illuminating but really most confounding exposition of planetary influences. He rolled off the jargon of his trade in a manner which was, in itself, sufficient to carry conviction, and showed, with a wealth of quotations and illustrations from the careers of other people in the village, what a tremendous risk the business involved. Then, suddenly stemming the tide of his own eloquence, he said with a fine simulation of modesty. "After all, I am a human being like yourselves. I am not God. My reading may be wrong. What I find, I have disclosed to you. You may consult other astrologers and make sure."

But Mahadeva Sastri's mind was made up. Garudachari was far and away the best astrologer he knew and, worst of all, had a fatal facility for prognosticating evil. It was the firm belief of the people in the neighbourhood that he had but to foretell ill-luck and it would come to pass though it may not have been in the Book of Fate. He seemed to possess the power to twist destiny to justify his instinctive apprehension of evil. Mahadeva Sastri realised how near the brink he had strayed and thanked his stars, which shepherded by Garudachari, had saved him from toppling over. Any thought of marrying Ramasubbu Aiyar' daughter after this clear indication of the divine will was out of the question. And, before the sun went down in the west that evening, the engagement was declared off.

VI

On July 15, the very last day of the month of *Ani*, two marriages were solemnised among the good people of Mailam. Between the hours of ten and twelve, when the constellation *Virgo* was in the ascendant, *Chiranjivi* Mahadeva Sastri to *Sowbhagyavati* Subbammal, daughter of Vengu Aiyar, at Mailam.

At the same hour, in the little shrine at Komaramalai, *Chiranjivi* Krishnamurthi to *Sowbhagyavati* Kamalambal, daughter of Ramasubbu Aiyar.

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES

IN the little Native State of Mudrabone, life ran on simple lines. The Palace was the centre of the universe and the Rajah its central sun. Round him radiated the various heavenly bodies which formed the official hierarchy. Not that the Rajah made any difference between the official and the non-official but questions of rank and precedence so dominated personal ambitions and created amusing complications that the veracious chronicler had better mention the fact as a feature of Mudrabone life. Rajah Mahabir Prasad was a simple-mannered, easy-going man, very much at home with his people and had no need of the stockades which modern ceremonial erects around the divinity that is a ruling prince. Unlike Rustum Beg of Kolazai, he did not lust for a C.S.I. but his Dewan Jivaji Punt did. Jivaji ran the administration of Mudrabone with his eyes resolutely fixed on the Government of India, or rather, the Government of India's Agent at Sarbay. That way the road to honours lay, and Jivaji strove by every means in his power to please (and sometimes appease) what he called this "roadside deity" on whose goodwill depended the acquisition of honours. There were Agents who liked Jivaji, others who didn't, but the Agent who had any doubts as to Jivaji's ability has not been to Mudrabone yet. The Rajah relied on him completely and the people had the greatest faith in his judgment. There was a snatch of rustic song which ran, "To-morrow comes to court the Rayar Jivaji; go to him for redress those who have grievances." To the Rajah, Jivaji had his uses. He was a regular old-time Minister, a sort of Military and Private Secretary combined and the keeper of his royal master's conscience. He had to bring in the taxes, keep the Rajah's wives in good-humour, doctor his accounts and generally keep up appearances. More than anything, he had to explain the Rajah to the Political Agents, and, between you and me, the Rajah did take a lot of explaining. It was said that the party who ran the Rajah and, therefore, in some measure, the State, was Kalyani, the dancing-girl. This latter, I have no hesitation in saying was a most unmitigated misstatement. The Rajah's relations with his wives (and there were four of them) ran on strictly scheduled lines. When he was tired and exhausted with affairs of state, it was to Kalyani that he turned for solace and refreshment. The Rajah, it was said, had a habit of mixing up Sirkar moneys with his own (which was certainly wrong, if true) and he frequently allowed generous remissions when seasons were bad (which was most certainly right). These annoyed some Political Agents very much and they made themselves very disagreeable. It was then that Jivaji found his job not worth the keeping. There was another thorn on his side and that was Seshadri Sarma. Seshadri Sarma 'spoke.' That summed him up completely. He spoke on the slightest provocation. He was always speaking to the people of their troubles, of representative institutions, municipal bodies and such like things. He set them thinking. And, worst of all, he interviewed Agents and put them wise on local affairs. The Rajah left it to Jivaji to deal with Agents and agitators, for to him, there was no choosing between the two. They were both equally unreasonable. Once, however, he contrived to get even with the Agent. Major Clifford Macartney was a genial Irishman who came of a family which had seen service in India ever since the days of John Company. The White Man's Burden sat very lightly on his shoulders and, towards the Indian he behaved like a man and a brother, or, at any rate, as like one as they and the conventions of his caste would let him. He liked Rajah Mahabir very much and the talk one day turned on the irregularities abovementioned. The Rajah cited a verse from the *Sukraniti* and said that taxes should be collected even as the bees gather honey. It should all go back to the people. The Rajah did not like to grind the faces of the poor, and believed in getting just what was needed to run the administration. As for the mixture of moneys (which was assumed rather than admitted) it was but a trifling irregularity. The Rajah spent all he got on fairs and festivals where liege and man made common holiday. His obligations were great and he did nothing except on purpose. When Major Macartney hinted about Kalyani, the Rajah pointed out she had never influenced his official conduct and that even she served a purpose.

" What purpose ? " asked Major Macartney, wondering.

" Mé " replied the Rajah unblushingly.

" But, look at your position, Rajah, and the obligations of which you speak. You must be a God to your people. You and I must be infallible."

Macartney hated lecturing to people, but that was part of his job and he had to go through with it.

" The people know their god, Major, and a god does not fall from his high estate. Do you see that picture on the wall ? "

On the wall stood the picture of a stoutish, very dark woman in a white *sari*, somewhat egregiously adorned with hoops and rings on nose and ears. Macartney asked who it was with a quizzical look.

"That was Prothero's principal girl," said the Rajah.

Colonel Prothero had been the Officer Commanding the Mudrabone area in former years, and the Gazetteer recorded that he was known as the Father of the People. But he was known to have had a succession of swarthy mistresses, of whom Arulayi alone endured to the end.Prothero left her a brick house and ten thousand rupees in cash on which her descendants were flourishing.

Macartney was silent for a minute, then he burst into laughter. "You have me there, Rajah," he said. Rajah Mahabir Prasad took advantage of the occasion to warn the Agent against placing too great reliance on persons like Seshadri Sarma. But Macartney said, "Your Highness mustn't mind them. Men will talk, and talking does no harm. They speak only for the joy of giving tongue. These people cut little ice." The conversation closed over a whisky and soda.

II

One of the features of life at Mudrabone was its European colony. There were quite a number of European settled there and they were a cosmopolitan crowd. British, French, Scandinavian and American they were, but all of them Mudrabonians in their devotion to the Rajah Mahabir. This, added to the fact that they were living in a back-water, accounted for the absence of anything in the nature of racial strife between the European and the Indian population. There were the official Englishmen, Peter Hodkins, the Engineer and Guy Hennessey, the policeman. There had been a Political Agent who had looked too closely into matters and made himself most tiresome. Rajah Mahabir Prasad had been fain to purchase peace by agreeing to the appointment of these two men to his public service. He knew that Englishmen were easy to manage if one went the right way to work. He dined and *feted* them pretty frequently and they, in turn, were really charmed by his gracious, old-world courtesy and practical wisdom. Though they had been inclined to be uppish in the beginning, they soon realised that things were done quite competently at Mudrabone and that what the Mudrabone official lacked was the quality of self-advertisement. The Wesleyans accounted for the Rev. John Porter and his wife, Miss Baker at the school and one or two others. There was the Swedish mission Hospital with sweet Noomi Hagge at its head, and there was quite a handful of French priests and American missionaries. There were again, the Culpepper-Johnsons, who owned land in the State and had been settled there from time out of mind. In their wake, had come the the Colt-Enderbys, the planting people, who owned a tea-garden at the Shyamagiris, which they ran from Mudrabone, going up to the hills during the hot weather. Between them and the Culpepper-Johnsons there was a certain amount of rivalry, which afforded some mild amusement to the good people of Mudrabone. Mrs. Colt-Enderby maintained that the Johnsons were largely 'country.' Old Culpepper-Johnson was very brown in colour, lounged about clad in a '*lungi*' and loved to eat bazaar-bought curry and rice, sitting on the floor. He called his wife '*Kutti*' and spoke Tamil like a native, which was rather a sore point with her. She had tried to cure him of his 'disgusting' ways, but he had replied, "Don't worry, my dear. I have lost the touch. India is your country and mine till we die." Mrs. Johnson had tried to persuade her neighbours that they were pure English and that old C. J. belonged to a family that had come over in the days of the East India Company and that they had made an excellent marriage in the time of Sir John Shore, which accounted for their hyphenated name. But Mrs. Enderby and the others would make agreeable murmurs and change the conversation. Even the elegant gentleman with side-whiskers, cravat and top-hat, standing by the side of a lady in a poke-bonnet and a flowing skirt and looking on from the drawing-room wall, failed to carry conviction. The Colt-Enderbys were positive that there had been a casual connection between a former Culpepper and a 'native woman.' So that, when Dr. Grose, who poked among tombstones and old records discovered an entry in a Northern Indian Church register that Colonel Culpepper of the 102nd Foot had married Emily, the daughter of Major-General Johnson by his Native Christian *wife* Miriam, and said that a junior branch of the family persisted in the Native State of Mudrabone, and also indicated its connection with the barony of Wych Culpepper, all Mudrabone was pleased. For they loved the Culpepper-Johnsons, who were happy, friendly folk. The Enderbys were stuck-up, stiff and standoffish. Old C. J used to refer to the *katchi* between the two families and ask, "That's our caste system. Is India much worse?"

But one cannot have too much of a good thing or have it long. It was fated that there should be a strain in the relations between the Europeans and Indians at Mudrabone. And Fate worked itself in this wise. A band of virtuous people in Los Angelos or Minnesota (it does not really matter which) decided for the good of their souls that they would work for the moral uplift of India. It was Fate again that assigned Mr. and Mrs. Marmaduke Odo to the native state of Mudrabone. The eager couple came and stayed with the Colt–Enderbys, which was rather a bad beginning. Mr. Odo was a thin lean man, who seemed all goggles and Adam's apple; he seconded his wife in all that she said and it was evident that the mare was the better horse of the two. The chief points in Mrs. Odo's appearance were a fixed glare in her eyes and an acid smile on her lips. For the rest, she was a masterful woman, flat-chested, bony and angular. She was an industrious caller and the process of making herself agreeable was very painful. Meetings were her line and she organised study circles which were thinly attended, despite the chocolate and tea which she dispensed. After a few preliminary skirmishes, she got up a full-dress meeting under the auspices of the Society for Eastern Uplift and invited all the townsmen to attend. She wanted Dewan Jivaji Punt to preside but he got out of it, as he somehow felt that the Odos weren't the genuine article and were going to put their foot into it. So, Mrs. Odo asked Mr. Colt-Enderby and, in a weak moment, he consented. All Mudrabone turned out to hear the newcomer, and even old C. J. was there with his wife. When somebody mentioned the recent additions to the colony, C. J. replied, "Yes, there they are, as if we hadn't *padres* enough already." (This man was an unabashed heathen.) Mrs. Odo went to work in the orthodox style, commiserated us for our sins, gave tables of statistics and said all the things that had been said before. The only difference was that what Mrs. Odo said was liberally soaked in vinegar. There was "a chiel among them, takin, notes" and that was Seshadri Sarma. I looked at him and I knew there was going to be trouble. It was not so much what Mrs. Odo said as the way she said it that rubbed us on the raw. She said we were filthy, obscene and sex-obsessed and all that sort of thing. Colt-Enderby, who could not make a speech to save his life, mumbled something about Indians lacking character, whatever he meant by it. That put the lid on things and the audience poured out, hotly discussing the speeches. A few dignitaries lagged behind and Judge Ananta Gowda was asked to say thanks and he made a speech expressing gratitude. One can always get that sort of man to do that sort of thing. At the end, Mrs. Enderby came up to Culpepper-Johnson and asked, almost triumphantly, "Wasn't it a rattling good speech, Mr. Johnson ?" Old C. J. thought for a moment, looked round and said, loud enough for all to hear, "Gibberish." Mrs. Enderby was taken aback, smiled weakly and left. Ananta Gowda looked foolish.

III

There was only one thing to do and that was to get up a counter meeting. All the time Mrs. Odo was tearing us to pieces, the outraged audience was looking at Seshadri Sarma. Would he take it all lying down, or, would he throw it back in her face ? Seshadri Sarma had the gift of the gab and could give as hot as he received. He used to speak on grievances which did not aggrieve and suggest remedies for unsuspected ills. Now, Mrs. Odo had brought a lot of grist to his mill and, as the people of Mudrabone said, "It is like mouthful of flecked rice to the old woman who munched an empty mouth."

A meeting was duly advertised and old Damodar Shanbogue, the oldest vakil in the place and a leading landholder, presided. All Mudrabone was there to see the cudgels raised on behalf of the slandered community. Seshadri Sarma roused himself to a fine fury and met every one of Mrs. Odo's arguments categorically. What he lacked in logic, he made up by vehemence. I need not repeat all that he said. It was, I am sorry to say, vile, vicious and in execrable taste. His only excuse and justification, if such a plea could either excuse or justify, was that he went to Mrs. Odo for his model. He said that all that she had said of the Indian really applied to her and her race. It was but a step from her to Europeans in general and Seshadri Sarma took it. He said that Mrs. Odo had no business to come to India slandering us. God meant her to stay in America and in America she should have stayed. Why, if it came to that, the English had no business to be in India, which was meant for the Indians. He said all this and more, "which ev'n to name wad be unlawfu." He forgot that he would be wounding his friends at Mudrabone. The thought of Peter Hodkins and Hennessey or the Colt-Enderbys would not have stopped him. But, if he had guessed that he was also hitting at the Culpepper-Johnsons and the kindly Swedes, that would surely have stayed his hand. But, no, public speaking was like wine which went to his head. There was no holding him and he turned and rent the woman like a dog. He created a tremendous impression and was loudly cheered. Mudrabone was vindicated.

But all this had an unexpected sequel. The Colt-Enderbys heard of it and were wild. Mrs. Enderby spoke of the cheek and audacity of 'the agitator' to Peter Hodkins, who was heartily sick of the business and only said, "Serve her right." But, Hennessey, who often groaned under the weight of the White Man's Burden, foamed at his mouth. Mrs. Enderby keyed him up to the proper pitch, with the result that Hennessey decided to proceed against Seshadri Sarma and the whole 'damned gang.' Mr. Enderby managed to persuade the Wesleyan and the American missionaries that their honour was at stake. The Rev. John Porter was indiscreet enough to refer somewhat caustically to Seshadri Sarma and his countrymen in one of his sermons. The Police were put on the job and feelings ran high in Mudrabone. Luckily, the Odos went on a tour in Northern India, else, things might have been much worse.

Hennessey reported to Dewan Jivaji and insisted on action being taken. (Jivaji was having trouble with the Agent over the palace jewels. Some of the jewels were missing and the Rajah's wives disclaimed knowledge. His Highness was frankly unhelpful and the Agent was sending reminders by telegram. Whyever shouldn't a Rajah do what he liked with his jewels?). Jivaji told Hennessey not to mind, and warned him that he would only give a much-needed advertisement to Sarma and his men. But Hennessey was firm, spoke of the blow to British prestige and threatened to resign unless something were done. That was not the way in which an official talked to the Head of the Government. But Hennessey was an Englishman and safety lay in giving in to him. If a Mudrabone man had spoken in that way, Jivaji would have sent him home packing. Hennessey, he dard not treat like that. It might even cost him his job, let alone his missing his title, an enlarged pension and state-paid servants in his retirement.

To simplify matters, there was a demi-official note from the Agent asking what was being done in the matter. He said, "It is time that this man were taught a lesson. He is becoming a positive nuisance. He must be taught to carry a civil tongue in his head." So orders were duly passed, sanctioning the prosecution of Seshadri Sarma for trying to create racial strife. There was a section in the Mudrabone Penal Code which answered to the corresponding section in the Indian enactment and the case was laid under it.

IV

A prosecution was duly launched and Seshadri Sarma was the hero of the hour. People wondered what His Highness was doing and it got about that His Highness heartily hated these outlandish proceedings but that he was hustled into it by his pusillanimous Dewan. There was no reason why such a rumour should get about but there it was and the wise man does not trouble to seek a reason for it. The case dragged on for a few weeks and it was felt that Seshadri Sarma's conviction was a foregone conclusion. However, Venkatacharya, the Magistrate, gave an unexpected turn to the proceedings. The Police had contented themselves with just proving the speech or, rather, the mangled article, which from memory and shorthand notes was treated as the speech. Venkatacharya devided that he would ascertain the effect produced on the minds of the hearers by examining a few of the leading men that had been present at the meeting. So, he summoned about half-a-dozen of them as court witnesses and among them was Culpepper-Johnson. Hennessey was furious at what he called the wrong-headedness of the Magistrate and was present at the trial. Old Culpepper-Johnson got into the box and seemed thoroughly to enjoy the experience.

Asked whether he had attended the meeting, he replied that he had, in a manner which seemed to suggest that he would attend it again, if that were possible.

"Do you remember what the accused said ?" asked the Magistrate.

"He said a good many things which I do not remember. He seemed to speak on every subject under the sun and he was remarkably effective."

"Remarkably effective—That must be noted, your honour," eagerly interposed the police inspector who was conducting the prosecution.

"What was the effect produced on you by the speech ?"

"That people who lived in glass houses should not throw stones at other peoples' houses" answered Mr. Johnson.

Hennessey caught Mr. Johnson's idea and swore under his breath.

"Was there anything in the accused's speech to which you could take exception" asked the Magistrate.

"Not a word," said C. J. with emphasis.

"It is said that he was most offensive and rude and that he was trying to set the Europeans against the Indians. Is that a fact?"

"If I had thought that he was doing anything of the kind, I should not have stayed there."

The vakil for the defence suggested that the witness might be asked whether he attended Mrs. Odo's lecture and what he thought of it. It was irrelevant, contended the police inspector. There was some argument, and the Magistrate finally put the question.

"Yes. I was present at the lecture and was sorry to have gone. Seshadri Sarma gave some hard knocks, but for decency of expression and general fairess, I infinitely prefer his speech to the American lady's. She drove it in with a kick. She sent me home gaping," concluded Mr. Johnson.

This was a knock-out blow for the prosecution and when the other witnesses, encouraged by C. J's. example said that, apart from a vigorous criticism of Mrs. Odo's very offensive speech, there was nothing to worry about in Seshadri Sarma's reply, the acquittal of the accused seemed to follow as a matter of course. And acquitted Seshadri Sarma was before he was three days older. People said that Venkatacharya was astonished at his own courage and that he had no sleep for one week afterwards for thinking of what might happen to him. I do not believe a word of it.

Hennessey was beside himself with rage. He stamped and threatened, he cursed and swore. Jivaji was very much annoyed. He would have been content if the Magistrate had found Seshadri guilty and given him a nominal sentence. The prestige of the ruling race would have been vindicated and the matter speedily forgotten. That was the worst of it. One cannot rely on these modern magistrates. They perpetrated all sorts of foolishnesses in the name of the law. He knew Hennessey would give him no peace. He would talk of injured reputations, quote the Agent and worry the life out of him.

It was about this time that Mrs. Odo returned from her Northern Indian tour. She had travelled from place to place, interviewed Desarakshaka Gopinatha Ghorpade, Kannadaratna Sadasiva Heggade and other leaders of the National Movement. She varied her method of attack and started writing to the *Sarbay Afternoon Post* and other newspapers about their wonderful example and self-sacrifice and having done that, naively quoted and misquoted them to prove her generalisations about the moral depravity of the Indian people. If, as Dr. Johnson has said, no man is written down except by himself, Mrs. Marmaduke Odo wrote herself down completely. But the Sarbay *Daily Intelligencer*, which could not stand the idea of any white man or woman having a good word to say of these 'enemies of the British Raj,' in a series of articles, drew attention to the misguided activities of persons, who wrote disquieting articles on Indian affairs, after but a few weeks' stay in the country. It spoke of female Padgetts and 'travelled idiots who helped to misgovern the land.' If the Mudrabonians had seen those articles they would have rejoiced, but they never read the Sarbay *Daily Intelligencer* and so missed a treat. These however were read by the Political Agent, Major Macartney, who recognised the offender.

Hennessey got a copy of Venkatacharya's judgment and returned to the attack. He wanted to take the matter up on appeal. Jivaji fenced and feinted and played for time. The Political Agent was due to visit Mudrabone shortly and Jivaji proposed to wait and see. If the could get Major Macartney on his side, Hennessey would be silenced.

The Major arrived and was in great good humour. (The missing jewels had been discovered and the affair had blown over.) He was always a pleasant man, but Jivaji, whose relations with Europeans were purely official, could never be sure of their temper. It was his considered creed that the way to an Englishman's head and heart lay through his stomach. He had a few queer maxims and this was one of them. Jivaji was wondering how to begin, when Major Macartney himself started it. All three of them were there, Rajah Mahabir Prasad, Jivaji Punt and the Major.

"What the devil of a row there has been, Rajah Saheb! I am sure you are pretty sick of it?" asked Major Macartney.

"Well, it was a sorry business. That fellow is awfully cheeky," said His Highness, tentatively.

"But the American woman gave him a lot of provocation, didn't she?"

"That was no reason why he should have gone and called other people all sorts of names," said Jivaji Punt.

"I shouldn't have worried, Major, but for Hennessey butting in. And there was your letter which held a very clear hint to us to take action," said His Highness. And then, seeing a smile hover round his lips, "I thought, Major, you did not mind people talking. They cut very little ice."

"I see what you are driving at. Generally I don't mind that. But circumstances alter cases. And, further, I did not know that the Odo woman had been so provocative. Do you know what her latest game s ?"

"Are you referring to her articles in thc Sarbay *Afternoon Post* ?" asked His Highness.

"Yes" nodded Major Macartney. "She desereves no consideration."

"What would you do if you had a troublesome tooth, Major ?" asked His Highness, after a pause.

"I should get rid of it," answered Macartney.

"She is a troublesome tooth," said Rajah Mahabir Prasad, with decision.

Jivaji saw the signs and gave a sigh of relief. "I do not think it is necessary to file an appeal in Seshadri Sarma's case," observed Jivaji, feeling his way.

"Certainly not," said the Major. "I think the acquittal quite proper. And Government should do nothing that would look like taking sides."

"But, Mr. Hennessey— " said Jivaji.

"Oh, Hennessey be hanged!" interrupted Major Macartney. "What does he know ? He is a mere *bucha*."

So the appeal was dropped and, Hennessey, after sulking a bit, became himself again. The Colt-Enderbys took longer to recover. Anyway, when the Marmaduke Odos decided that the climate of Mudrabone did not suit them and transferred themselves to some place near Bhamo, on the Burmese frontier, they left unregretted.

V

All this happened long ago; so long ago that it would not be worth while seeking to fix dates. The face of Mudrabone has changed very much since then. A railway now runs into the State, people live under electric *punkahs*, there is an efficient telephone service and numerous bus-services in various stages of decripitude. Rajah Mahabir Prasad has long since been gathered to his forefathers and his son, Raghuchandra, rules in his stead. He is a most affable prince, keeps a splendid racing stud, spends Christmas every year in Calcutta and the hot weather in the South of France. His bodyguard is one of the finest in India and gets its uniform direct from Bond Street. Fairs and festivals and such-like frivolities are things of the past, and the palace sinecures have been abolished. An Indian member of the I.C.S. is our Dewan (Jivaji retired as a Rao Bahadur, and died duly) and Seshadri Sarma is President of the Legislative Council and a Power in the State. These and other changes have taken place—but all that is another story. Still the people look back regretfully on the days of Rajah Mahabir Prasad. Present-day Political Agents, however, maintain that Mudrabone is a model state and can give points to British India, which is only fair, seeing that one should return what one has borrowed. Yes, circumstances do alter cases.

THE HOSTS OF TUSCANY

"THE best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley" sang the poet. To this may be added a rider. The miscarriage of human plans is never so marked as when they are directed to bringing ill to others. It often happens, in such cases, that the scheming mice and men are caught in the traps of their own devising. Let therefore no one interfere with the course of destiny. Those who seek to do so never come to any good and only end by going to the wall.

An excellent illustration of this truth was afforded by the doings in the hamlet of Pidaripathai a few years ago. It existed in the bleakest part of the district of Kadur. To one side of it, lay stretched for miles the mud huts of the Vallambas and, on the other, a particularly active clan of Valayars. Pidaripathai itself was a potter village, set in an arid waste of sand. It contained a score or so of potter families, who earned their living by making pots and pans for the Valayas and Vallambas or occasionally putting up caricatures in clay of men and animals to appease their tribal gods. For ten months in the year the sun streamed down on Pidaripathai relentlessly, making it a witch's cauldron, and the enormous clay-horse which the potters had put up to the local *Pidari* seemed to cry out to an unheeding Heaven for some mitigation of its unrelieved desolation. Government, which is always wise, must have had a notion that some day it would erupt and throw up lava and flame, and that it wouldn't do to be caught napping. So, at any rate, some old-time official must have suggested, for authority was represented there by a police outpost in charge of a Head Constable and two men. It was a mud-and-tile affair of two rooms, in one of which was kept one carbine for use between the two men, a couple of rusty swords in condemned scabbards and a baton or two. The other was the lock-up where a Valaya devil lodged for a night or two before confessing to some sheep or fowl theft. Annavi Naidu, Head Constable No. 748, had been there from time out of mind. Lean and cadaverous, with a lost-dog air, he seemed to fit in with his surroundings. Inspecting officers regularly wondered what good he was at his job, made up their minds to get rid of him as soon as they returned to headquarters and regularly forgot all about it once their backs were turned on that abode of the devil. And so he hung on, getting nothing out of life, as it seemed, and giving nothing in return. Any way, there he was, the sole representative of his King in that God-forsaken place. He had no rival bidder for power and authority. Kallikarai, where there was a Sub-Registry and a dispensary, was ten miles away and, so far as Pidaripathai was concerned, may have been at the end of the earth. The inhabitants of Pidaripathai and its neighbourhood had no documents to register and, if they ever fell ill, they left the cure to be worked out by nature, or doctored themselves with the aid of the herbs of the forest. For the 'waters' of the dispensary, they had no use. Their own plentiful quarrels, they usually made up by a reference to Annavi Naidu, whose decisions, if they lacked forms and ceremonies, had, at any rate, a rough-and-ready decisiveness which gave satisfaction to the parties concerned. There were, of course, petty thefts, which Annavi registered in the police books with discrimination. He never allowed them to give an evil reputation to his charge or unduly swell the criminal statistics of the district. And as there were no complaints of hushing up crime (the member who sat for the division hadn't even heard of Pidaripathai) the authorities were grateful. This does not mean that there weren't thefts of sheep and fowl or even that they did not occur extensively. But they never meant more than a temporary deprivation to their owners, who always got back their property at a comparatively trifling cost to themselves. Once a theft was reported, Annavi made an expedition in state to the Valaya and Vallamba habitations and slanged both the communities with all his might and gave an ultimatum that, if the missing property were not back before a new day dawned, he would see the whole lot of them in jail before he was a week older. The headman concerned then came to see the policeman in private, a couple of rupees changed hands (for the tribal soothsayer had to be consulted to locate the thief) and the next that one heard of it was that there had been a drinking bout in the evening and the lost property was seen to graze innocently in front of the owner's hut at the first streak of dawn. The owner was never a loser except by a rupee or two at the most, but it helped a poor devil to live and the economic balance to be maintained. On the whole an excellent understanding prevailed between the communities of the hamlet and its neighbourhood, who had nothing "agin' the government."

That the marauding, though eminently manageable, Valayas would ever find themselves in a state of war with the Vallambas was, therefore, not a matter which Annavi Naidu could be expected to take seriously. So that, when the potters returned from the big *manjivirattu* at Embal and told him of the high words which had passed between Kari, the Valaya lad, and the Vallamba headman's son, in consequence of the former's audacity in forestalling the latter and capturing the bull which the Vallamba had marked for his own, the Head Constable was not interested. And when they said that the Vallambas had sworn to raze the Valaya huts to the ground and drive them out of the country, Annavi was frankly incredulous. "Do them good", he is reported to have said. There was an immense crowd, the potters said, and the enraged bull was pursuing its mad career and the headman's son seemed within an ace of capturing it, when from somewhere out of the crowd, Kari flung himself suddenly in front of the bull, turned its flank and, seizing him by the horns, held him in his grip as if in a vice. A stampede ensued, and the headman's son tripped and fell just at the very moment when Kari was untying the gorgeously-laced cloth and the packet of fifty rupees which the bull carried on his horns—the reward of the captor. It all happened just where the Valaya women were congregated, and right in front stood the flirtatious girl who dominated the hearts of both the youths. The headman's son gathered himself together just in time to see a smile vanish round the corner of Kathali's lips. Had he been any other, ridicule would have been his certain portion. Instinctively, the Vallambas felt the affront involved in the other fellow's success and the unmanifested sneer of the onlookers. The insult would have been avenged there and then with a broken Valaya head or two, but the occasion wasn't propitious, and the spectators drunk with delight at the plucky capture by the Valaya lad, gave no encouragement, Had the matter stood there, it might have been speedily forgotten, and this story would not have been written. But when darkness set in and the stars showed in the deep blue of the tropical sky, a fugitive band of Vallambas, with the discomfited headman's son, left for their homes and, at the parting of the ways which led to Kallikarai and Pidaripathai, came up with a party of Valaya lads who had been making merry over Kari's tirumph. The Vallambas passed on, a deep scowl on their faces, but not before they had heard the jeering remark, which someone had flung from the Valaya group, "Our *lathis* are going back unfed"—meaning without being used on the backs of men. And, which men but Valllamba men? The Vallambas halted for a second, turned back and went on their way again. A ripple of feminine laughter was borne upon the breeze and it set their ears tingling. The night was too dark for facial visibility. Else, one could have seen the rugged faces of the Vallambas tautened with rage, and the heaving of their broad, ebony chests under the surge of passion—sure foreboding of ill.

That night, under a starry sky, in the sandy bed of the Pidari *Kanmoi*, a hundred Vallambas sat, men and women, and swore by all their tribal gods to avenge the insult. The Valaya's daring was provocation enough. But that hussy's mocking smile, the laughter of scorn of the petty, thieving Valaya women! It must be wiped out by every means. If a few had to hang for it, why, they would. What was life in the face of the unconcealed contempt of those Valaya vermin?

So the potters of Pidaripathai were sure they would hear of it, and they dreaded to think of the Valayas and the Vallambas roused to an answering fury. Had they not heard tell of the blight which fell on the country in that year of famine, *Dathu*, nigh fifty years agone, when the Valayas and the Vallambas set fire to each other's houses and plundered all the land till a white man came with a hundred policemen and completed the ravages by setting fire to all the habitations of the contending parties left standing, till no trace of them was left? But, pitiful to relate, Annavi Naidu paid no heed to it, not even to make a note of it in the General Diary of the station. But the potters squatted on the foreground of their huts and talked of it, while the pots were boiling and as they worked among their wheels, making the ware which was not going to sell for many a long day to come.

II

The days passed on and Annavi Naidu heard no more about it. He was not one who encouraged gossip and his cold reception of the spicy information which the potters gave barred further communication. But there, by the thatched mud walls of the Vallamba habitations, a brisk, informal commerce went on. There was a great scurrying to and fro, headman met headman and plans of revenge were devised. At last, on the day of the full moon, the entire body of Vallambas, near a thousand in all, met in the Pidari *Kanmoi*. The sins of the Valaya were great, indeed, and it was up to the Vallambas to teach them a lesson they would remember the rest of their lives, the same as their ancestors had done, in that fell year of famine, fifty years agone. They resolved, with wild gesticulations and much brandishing of sticks, to give the Valayas battle. Yes, battle, with scythe, flail and hammer, when red blood would flow and wet the white sands of the *Kanmoi*. An ultimatum was to be sent at early dawn. The price of peace was the surrender by Kari, the Valaya, of the prize he had 'sneaked' and a fine of two hundred rupees to be paid in silver before the New Moon came round again. Else, let the Valayas, if they were men and begotten of their fathers, meet the Vallambas in the bed of the Pidari *Kanmoi* at ten *naligais* to sunset on the eve of the New Moon. The gathering shouted approval and slapped one another's backs in confirmation. On the morrow, the customary symbol was to be affixed to the hut of the leading Valaya headman. It was a sheepskin, drenched in blood, with one huge blob of charcoal paste to indicate the New Moon, and two hundred tiny dots in white to indicate the silver rupees. This formal act would further be explained by the Vallamba *thandalgar*, who would fetch the answer. The meeting then broke up in disorder, loud exclamations rent the air, and individual members swore to exact individual reparation for many a suddenly-remembered grudge of old.

The message was accordingly carried to the Valaya headman, who hurriedly called together a few tribesmen to listen to the messenger's explanations. The shivering *thandalgar* gave out the conditions of peace and, as he concluded, a laugh of withering scorn broke over his head. "Go, tell thy women-bitten masters that the challenge is accepted. Say, further, man, that we dictate the identical terms to you. Should you fail to pay us ere the New Moon comes round, two hundred rupees for our temple of the *Pidari*, we will hang round ler long-neglected neck, a garland of Vallamba skulls, picked from the *Kanmoi* sands, coloured red by Vallamba blood." The shaking messenger stayed not to further parley, but slunk back, grateful for the gift of life. Did the chunk of sugarcane which found its way into the mouth of the elephant ever come back whole?

And a great concourse of Valayas met by the side of the *Pidari* temple. Again, of a night, after preliminary informal talks, they gathered to make their plans. Over the heads of the audience, there rose, compelling and curt, the thin, piping voice of Viyyamutri, the son of Vayyitri, the sole survivor of the fights of the famine year, when after accounting, single-handed for three brawny Vallambas, he received a gash on his skull, which still showed black against the moon-lit sky, and, ere he could recover, a stab from the darkness sent his right eyeball rolling on the ground. He decreed that all the Valayas should mobilise, gather their weapons, sticks and scythes, mattocks and hoes and above all, the fell *Ullayutham*, which broke heads and pierced bodies, more potent for havoc than the white man's Mauser or Gurkha *kukri*. They would sally forth, ten deep, in squads of a hundred each, at their head, Komali Kuppan, who would dance them to victory. "Oh, fill me with toddy, rich toddy from the palm, till my belly bursts, and I will dance the dance of death over the sheeted corpses of the Vallambas," cried Komali Kuppan, the accredited buffoon of the caste.

And so the fight was well and truly begun.

But so far as the Head Constable was concerned, all continued to go well in this best of all possible worlds. He saw nothing, suspected nothing. No theft was reported, no case of wife-beating, no interrupted elopement. An exceeding peace reigned, and when, conformably to Police orders, Annavi Naidu went the round of the villages, the Valayas and the Vallambas gathered round him and showed him the respect due to him as the representative of law and order. With pleasant faces, they made him presents of fowl and vegetables, and spoke of the season's prospects, like men who had nothing on their minds.

III

It was a hot day in the month of May and the Fire-Star's ascendancy had begun and the sun blazed forth with appropriate fierceness. All Nature was hushed and, except for the raucous cawing of the ubiquitous crows, there was no sign of life. The blistering heat seemed sufficient to kill a man out of hand and did not require the aid of mere man to kill his brother.

At the Valaya habitation, on the outskirts of Pidaripathai, there was considerable bustle. Contingents arrived from the adjacent hamlets, all armed to the teeth. In the temple of the *Pidari*, Viyyamutri, son of Vayyitri, held sway. He put himself in command, not to direct operations, for at eighty, and with an inadequate eye, that was out of the question, but for good-luck! A great reputation was Viyyamutri's, for nothing to to which he had ever set his hand had gone wrong. Be it a wedding or a funeral or a petty pilfering expedition or a festival to the *Pidari*, it was Viyyamutri's lucky hand that started the proceedings. He formed his fellow-castemen into groups and, at the head of each, installed a centurion. At the head of all, hilariously drunk, marched Komali Kuppan, bearing aloft a banner which was none other than the sheepskin which the

Vallambas had sent, but with the fingers of the *Pidari* painted on it with sheep's blood—a malignant, dancing goddess, displaying round her neck a garland of human skulls, as intimation of what was going to befall the Vallambas, who had dared them to combat.

The hosts marched on, with swinging strides, a determined body of men, animated by the primal impulse to slay. Their way lay past the police station at Pidaripathai, and that was something like walking past the lion's den. But it would not do to cut across the fields, as that would rob the march of its spectacular effect, and they hoped, were almost sure, that the lion would not be prowling about, but lying at full length with eyes closed and a full stomach. The potters of Pidaripathai had collected to see them pass and discreetly wish them success, for it would not do to antagonise the Vallambas by too open a partisanship of the Valayas. A shout rent the air, appreciative response to the friendly interest shown. The march past the station was a trifle less boisterous and effected in double quick time.

Annavi Naidu lay within the station-house, taking his *siesta*, after having absorbed one of the squarest meals of which he had partaken in his life. The Valayas had brought him a gift overnight, a gift after the policeman's heart. It was a huge leg of mutton and a quantity of fresh vegetables to make into a side-dish. His wife buckled to and prepared one of the grandest repasts she had ever set before her lord. Annavi had some business to transact at a hamlet four miles away, regarding a runaway thief and he returned to station at midday, with an appetite whetted by anticipation of what was coming. He bathed long and leisurely in the station well and applying the trident mark to his forehead (Annavi was a devout Vaishnavite) performed his ablutions and sat down to his meal. It was past one when he broke his fast and he sat for one full hour doing full justice to the condimented curry, chutney of cocoanut and *chili* and the rich mutton soup which his wife set before him.

Dinner over, Annavi Naidu retired to the station-house and lay down to rest on the cowdung-smeared floor, with the police registers for a pillow. He lay stretched on the cool floor, naked save for his loin-cloth, his well-filled paunch showing smooth and taut as a drum. He soon fell into a sweet, dreamless sleep and was awakened only by the raucous voice of Soman Poosari, a leading potter of the village, who cried, " What Head *Aiya*, don't you hear what is going forward that you sleep in this fashion ? This day there is going to be murder and bloodshed. There go the Valayas, like Haidar's hosts, to fight the Vallambas. We warned you before, but you paid no heed to what the stupid potters said. For God's sake, go and see, sir, if you cannot prevent trouble ". Annavi Naidu, disturbed out of his sleep, hazily apprehensive of the dangers which seemed to be facing him now, asked pettishly, " What is it that you are talking about ?" " Come and see for yourself," answered the potter. "There they go, every mother's son, with Viyyamutri at their head, carrying sticks and crowbars and all the other weapons known to primitive man. And Komali Kuppan goes dancing in front, bearing aloft the banner of the *Pidari*. Unless you go and do something, it will be the year *Dathu* all over again. " Annavi craned his head and heard the distant thud, thud, of the vanishing Valaya tribesmen.

It did not take him long to decide what to do. After a moment's pause, he got into his uniform and strode off in the direction of the *Pidari Kanmoi*. Of his two men, one was lying ill of a fever, and the other had gone off on village-visiting duty and had not returned to the station. Annavi took a short cut, but it was hard work loping along in that scorching sun.

He felt that that day ‘the de’il had business in hand ” and that, to a large extent, he was to blame for not scotching the feud in time. For the first time in all his service at Pidaripathai, he ran like a ‘raw recruity’ under the drill master’s order.

The Valaya hosts, gaining in spirit as the time for the fray approached, had halted at the eastern end of the *Pidari Kanmoi* and were scanning the horizon for the enemy. None appearing in sight, the Valayas sent up a deafening shout of derision, concluding that the Vallambas’ feet had grown cold. But with an answering roar, the Vallambas, near a thousand in all, or so it seemed, defiled from the bend at the head of the *Kanmoi* and re-formed at the western bund. The war cries of the contending parties rent the air and almost simultaneously both sides left their positions and made for the middle of the *Kanmoi*. The white sands of the river-bed blistered one’s feet, but there was a madness in the brain which dulled everything but the desire for revenge. When within a hundred feet of each other, both sides halted for a few moments, collecting themselves for the final onrush.

Just then, and not a moment too soon, they described the spare, khaki-clad figure of the Head Constable, shambling along towards them, frantically waving his arms as a direction to desist. Behind him at a few hundred yards’ distance, came the potters of Pidaripathai, inquisitive to see what would happen. Annavi Naidu came panting and thrust himself in between the advancing hosts. He stood there breathless, his knees knocking together, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth and his entire face bathed in perspiration. Conflicting emotions, vaguely apprehended rushed through his mind. Fear, lest the excited mobs should tear him to pieces for his ill-timed interference, gave place to another fear that they would simply ignore him and fight their battle out, regardless of him and of the consequences. In the dim background of his mind, there floated departmental terrors in the shape of angry Inspectors, angrier D. S. Ps, dismissals and prosecutions for neglect of duty.

But what happened was something that he had scarcely hoped for. The bewildered policeman slowly realised that the advancing hosts had stopped in their career. For one moment of pleasurable torment, he could not believe his own eyes. The crowds were falling back, there were dispersals in the ranks. The policeman in Annavi Naidu came into his own. The tongue which had been glued to his palate recovered its normal position and his knees stood firm on his firmly-planted feet. Annavi Naidu's chest heaved with passion as he shouted, " What has come upon you, you fellows ? What is all this row about, this bluster and brawl ? Have you all grown mad ?" The Valayas and the Vallambas broke into disconnected groups. Viyyamutri, son of Vayyitri, skulked towards the policeman sheepishly, his great stick thrown away. Komali Kuppan stopped in his dance, and feebly murmured. " The Head *Aiya* has come inopportunely and spoiled the whole show ".

" Shut up, you foul-mouthed, drunken brute," shouted the Head Constable, who had overheard him. The Vallamba headmen had slunk away and the armed hosts continued to disintegrate into thinner and thinner batches. It was obvious that the arrival of the policemen had utterly demoralised them. Fighting was out of the question when the old Head *Aiya* was there in person. Yet, if the truth were known, it was not his authority they feared so much as the man himself, so kindly and sheltering. He had done no harm to any of them and had never thrown them over to the wolves, who would send poor devils to jail for stealing a fowl to appease one's hunger. They felt like school children discovered by an indulgent schoolmaster, grown suddenly irate over some more than ordinarily grave misdemeanour. Annavi Naidu correctly sensed the temper of the thinning crowds.

'You great skulking blackguards," he shrieked. "Have you forgotten that Annavi Naidu existed? Wait, I will have all your huts burnt, your cattle and belongings". Then, relaxing a little, he continued, "Run away, you rascals, run before I note down your names. If I see any one of you hanging about, take notice he is done for. And you, Viyyamutri, you are the snake before whom I set bowls of milk. What has possessed you in your senility? Is it that you find the one eye you are left with a hindrance?"

Viyyamutri lumbered up and, in a repentant voice, begged the Head *Aiya* to desist. "Let us thank the *Pidari* that you arrived in the nick of time."

"Nick of the time be hanged!" cried out Annavi. "I am sorry I came when I did. I should have come later to see you deprived of your other eye and all the Valaya and Vallamba dogs screaming with the pain of bloody heads and broken arms. I could then have sent for the Armed Reserve from Kadur, and after setting fire to your houses, marched you away to be hanged by the neck or to be sent to the Andamans, when your wives would be sold into slavery to the *pariahs*. Then, turning to the Vallamba headman, "You cunning devil, you tried to throw dust in my eyes yesterday, telling of your worries in connection with your son's wedding. You wanted to catch me sleeping. You are grown old like a ruined wall and yet you do not know your Annavi Naidu. Do you think I have lived so long among your rabbit hutches without being able to sense the game you were up to?"

Then, addressing all and sundry, "I thought, I hoped it was all mere bluster. I hoped that when it came to the scratch, you would remember that there was a

Head Constable at the police station and that you would allow his name at least to stay your thieving hands. But did you expect, you dogs, that Annavi Naidu would lie low and let you break the King's peace and the law of the government which he is here to preserve? Do you not know that it is the white man's government and that you cannot play at Haidar's hosts ? " and much more to the same effect.

The crowds melted away. The potters, neutrals and peaceable men, gathered round the policeman, full of admiration for the able and authoritative way in which he had nipped the mischief in the bud. Viyyamutri edged towards the policeman, abashed and wishing to beg forgiveness. But, no. The Head Constable was adamant. He had no use for this man of treachery. And Viyyamutri, son of Vayyitri, turned homewards feeling that he had made a fool of himself and wondering how to win back the favour of the policeman.

In a very short space of time the ground was cleared, and the white sands of the river bed glinted once more in the streaming light of the July sun, empty of all life.

Annavi Naidu and the potters remained for one full hour to make sure that the demon did not possess the tribesmen again and make them re-visit the scene they had just abandoned, with the same dread purpose as before. And potter boys went out and brought the reassuring news that the contingents had all dispersed and that tired and exhausted men squatted dejectedly in their huts at the Valaya and Vallamba habitations. It was then that Annavi Naidu and the potters returned to Pidaripathai, feeling that they had done a good day's work. Annavi Naidu's self-importance increased every moment and the incense which the potters burned at his shrine well-nigh turned his head. He decided that he would depute his two men to keep a strict, though informal, watch over the two camps to prevent any recrudescence.

It is some satisfaction that Annavi Naidu remembered his duty obligations to the extent of making a note in the General Diary of his station to the effect that hearing that on account of some misunderstandings the Valayas and Vallambas were meeting at the *Pidari Kanmoi* to create a breach of the peace, he proceeded to the spot and dispersed the crowds, which went away quietly.

A fortnight had passed and there had been no further commotion at Pidaripathai. Valayas and Vallambas had subsided into their usual peacefulness and full of penitence, were only preoccupied as to how best to recapture the kindly policeman's goodwill.

But the gods willed it otherwise. In the Indian countryside, Rumour is a busy agent, potent for untold mischief. The news of the meeting of the clans at the river-bed had reached the ears of the authorities at the district headquarters. Rumour saw to it that the facts were distorted out of all semblance to the truth. Tales of a bloody battle were poured into the horrified ears of the officials who were shocked, if not surprised, to hear that the Valayas and Vallambas had violently fallen upon one another, that some on either side had been killed on the spot and a number of others had sustained serious injuries. It was further stated that there had been no policeman on the spot and that when one went later to intervene, he was very nearly done to death. The result was that the Police Inspector of the circle went down the Pidaripathai to learn at first hand what had actually taken place. And from then, there was a great to-do in the village.

V

Inspector Kamakshi Razu was a young man of ambition. He had entered the Police as a Sub-Inspector and had managed to become an Inspector early in his service. Ill-natured people said that his promotions were not earned by merit but by discreet adaptation to the humours of his changing official superiors. He had served his apprenticeship under an officer who knew to a nicety on which side his bread was buttered and was an adept in the art of conveying to his superior officers the notion that he was the pivot of the police administration by cleverly claiming the credit for every bit of smart work which was done in the sub-division. All this, without treading on the corns of the subordinates to whom public opinion ascribed the credit. Kamakshi Razu had learned his lessons well. His ambitions were not extravagant, but to them he stuck with resolution. He longed for gazetted rank and for a handle to his name in the shape of a title. A Rao Saheb or Rao Bahadur did look nice before one's name on envelopes and invitation cards. Kamakshi Razu made up his mind that Pidaripathai was an excellent chance and decided to make a job of it. The New Year was still five months ahead and if the desired honour did not arrive then, it would not be his fault.

He arrived early one morning at Pidaripathai, accompanied by a Sub-Inspector and half-a-dozen constables. Annavi Naidu, taken by surprise, could not guess what this sudden descent meant. The Inspector put him a direct question as to what the rioting at the *Kanmoi* was about. Annavi, greatly relieved, told him what took place, only watering down his statement to the extent of suppressing the potters' anticipation of trouble and tried to make out that the encounter was more or less accidental. His resolute denial of any rioting having taken place, the Inspector received with frank disbelief. "Yours is a lost job, man," he told the Head Constable and sent for the potters of Pidaripathai. They told him of the *manjiviratta* and the Vallambas' threat of vengeance, the challenge sent by them and its acceptance by the Valayas, the gathering of the clans and the march past the police station. They blurted out that they had warned the Head Constable but that he had not taken the warning seriously. They expatiated upon the rare courage and coolness displayed by him in the face of the angry mob, on how he had flung himself before them and scattered them like chaff before the wind. That an unarmed Head Constable should have faced the situation with that cool bearing made no impression on the Inspector and he steadfastly shut his mind to the enormous personal influence which that old-time policeman possessed over the rude villagers.

"Very fine, indeed," was the Inspector's reply. "Let a conflagration start and then take credit for putting the fire out." He was making a note of the 'grave dereliction of duty' on the Head Constable's part in allowing a state of unrest to prevail among the Valayas and Vallambas who were very inflammable material.

The Inspector and his staff then paid visits to the huts of the castemen. As they say in the papers, 'Great sensation prevailed'. It was said that the small staff of police was only the prelude to the arrival of the *dorai* himself at the head of a hundred men, armed with carbines and guns, who were going to shoot down all the Valayas and Vallambas and set fire to the village and drive off all the cattle. Many of them made themselves scarce and the dozen or so whom the Inspector arrested (he was considering how he could present the case so as to get credit for a plucky capture) were asked what they had to say for themselves. They looked blank, not understanding the drift of it all. Charged with rioting and causing grievous hurt, they answered in a self-exculpatory attempt that they were innocent and that the blame was all on the other side. They mixed matters up with a primitive sense of self-preservation, and strove, by accusing the other party, to extricate themselves from an accusatiom which they feared would somehow or other be brought home to them. The best course, in such cases, is to pose as the victims and represent the other side as the aggressors.

The Inspector, his Sub-Inspector and others recorded statements which, they persuaded themselves, were made with full knowledge. In fairness to Kamakshi Razu, it must be said that, not having believed that there had been any rioting when he first arrived, he came gradually round to the view that, as a matter of fact, some heads had been broken in the *Kanmoi*; and this conviction helped him considerably when it came to a question of making his report to higher authority, whereon was to be founded his claim to promotion and honours. He drew preliminary attention to the traditional ferocity of the rival clans and the career of crime which they had pursued from time out of mind. A trifling incident had been allowed to inflame their minds and a carefully planned scheme of revenge had been matured which had effectuated in serious rioting at the *Pidari Kanmoi*. But for the Head Constable's culpable negligence, the rioting would never have taken place. Evidence clearly pointed to the existence of strong motive on the side of the Valayas for their forming themselves into a huge, unlawful assembly and for their having rioted with deadly weapons in the *Pidari Kanmoi*. Injuries had been inflicted in profusion but owing to lapse of time it was not possible to get medical certificates to prove the injuries. He proposed to treat the Vallambas as witnesses for the prosecution and proceed against the Valayas for offences under Sections 148 and 326 of the Indian Penal Code.

The D. M. and the D. S. P. ordered that cases be registered against both sides for the said offences, the accused in the one set of cases being treated as witnesses for the prosecution in the other. Thd potters of Pidaripathai were the witneses for the prosecution.

The D. M. and the D. S. P. arrived in state with a huge *posse* of men. Annavi Naidu was sent home in disgrace. Arrests were made of every able-bodied Valaya and Vallamba. The "*Nattunanban*," sent down a representative who duly reported that 'Police Raj' prevailed in the village, and the authorities were behaving in the most high-handed fashion. The D. M. swore a horrid oath and raged at, what he called, the rag's impudence, to the secret amusement of the D.S.P. who never looked at the paper and pretended nobody ever did, and that, at any rate, no harm ever came of its vapourings.

Kamakshi Razu was indefatigable. In all, about a hundred Valayas and Vallambas were arrested and sent up in batches of twenty to take their trial on charges of rioting and causing grievous hurt with deadly weapons. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate was an officer who swore by the Police and he took every word of what the Inspector said for gospel. He sentenced the accused to varying terms of imprisonment, the rank and file for one year and the ringleaders for two. Three months elapsed and the earliest had taken up their case on appeal and the Sessions Judge had felt compelled to acquit most of them and find only three of their number guilty of being members of an unlawful assembly. Annavi Naidu was seen in the Court premises, coaching the vakils who argued the case and this may have helped them to locate the real defects in the prosecution and present their case forcibly. The Judge held that the evidence was all trash and that the Head Constable had done a good day's work. It was a pity, he said, that this officer was not a witness for the prosecution. From the mass of hopelessly contradictory statements on record, certain facts stood forth clearly and these were that a crowd had gathered at the river-bed, that an unarmed Head Constable had rushed to the scene on hearing of it and that he had with commendable daring, flung himself before it and, dispersed it. The H. C, had evidently been there in time to prevent what might easily have developed into a bloody *fracas*. In this view of the matter, it followed that a number of persons were entitled to acquittal.

This put an altogether different complexion on the matter and the authorities decided to call a halt in the proceedings. A new D. M. had meanwhile arrived and thought Government had better start to reclaim the communities. Anyway, a departmental enquiry seemed called for and it came to be felt that there was more in the case than met the eye. An experienced D. S. P. was put on the matter and he determined to get to the bottom of things. A calmer atmosphere came to prevail and it was easy to see things in their proper perspective. Very early in the enquiry, it was evident that Kamakshi Razu had deliberately distorted facts and that Annavi was neither the coward nor the laggard that he was made out to be. Annavi was promptly recalled and installed in his old place. And, if the fellow walked with his head the least bit in the air, one can excuse him. The I. G. was a new man, who was supposed to know the department inside out and never did things by halves. He felt that Annavi had been most shabbily treated, decided that his unrehearsed act of gallantry deserved recognition and recommended him for the King's Medal. I still remember the scared look on his face when His Excellency pinned the medal on to his breast.

Kamakshi Razu was a problem. He could not survive the Sessions Judge's scathing criticisms and they were wondering what to do with him, when the difficulty was solved in a tragic manner. Baulked of his plans, he was often seen prowling about Pidaripathai like Plato's shades visiting their old haunts. One morning he was discovered in the prickly-pear bush by the roadside, lying with his skull-broken. It was rumoured that the one-eyed villain, Viyyamutri had come upon him suddenly one evening, that the devil took instant possession of him and that, in an uncontrollable impulse, he felled him like an ox with his club. It may be true or, it may not, and I dare not judge. The Police have not been of much help in the matter, for they treated the case as undetectable, and Viyyamutri sleeps the sleep of the just.

Long afterwards, going down to the settlement, I met Viyyamutri. The talk turned on other days and when some one spoke of the sad end of Inspector Kamakshi Razu, a wicked leer lit up the old villain's rugged face. When I mentioned it to Annavi, he looked into the middle distance and said gravely that it was a great mystery. So, I think it must have been my imagination, after all.

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